The Horus Heresy
Aaron Dembski-Bowden
THE FIRST HERETIC
Fall to Chaos

VISIT…

THE HORUS HERESY

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor's elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor's armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor's military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind's champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

LORGAR	Primarch of the Word Bearers
ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN	Primarch of the Ultramarines
MAGNUS THE RED	Primarch of the Thousand Sons
CORAX	Primarch of the Raven Guard
KONRAD CURZE	Primarch of the Night Lords
FERRUS MANUS	Primarch of the Iron Hands
PERTURABO	Primarch of the Iron Warriors

The Word Bearers Legion

KOR PHAERON	First Captain
EREBUS	First Chaplain
DEUMOS	Master of the Serrated Sun Chapter
ARGEL TAL	Captain, 7th Assault Company
XAPHEN	Chaplain, 7th Assault Company
TORGAL	Sergeant, Torgal Assault Squad
MALNOR	Sergeant, Malnor Assault Squad
DAGOTAL	Sergeant, Dagotal Outrider Squad
THE CRIMSON LORD	Commander of the Gal Vorbak

The Night Lords Legion

SEVATAR	First Captain

Legio Custodes

AQUILLON	Occuli Imperator, 'Eyes of the Emperor', Custodian
VENDATHA	Custodian
KALHIN	Custodian
NIRLLUS	Custodian
SYTHRAN	Custodian

The 301st Expedition Fleet

BALOC TORVUS	Master of the Fleet
ARRIC JESMETINE	Major, Euchar 54th Infantry

Imperial Personae

CYRENE VALANTION	Confessor of the Word
ISHAQ KADEEN	Official remembrancer, imagist
ABSOLOM CARTIK	Personal astropath to the Occuli Imperator

Legio Cybernetica

INCARNADINE	Conqueror Primus of the 9th Maniple, Carthage Cohort
XI-NU 73	Tech-Adept of the 9th Maniple, Carthage Cohort

Non-Imperial Personae

INGETHEL	Emissary of the Primordial Truth

PART ONE

GREY

Forty-three years before the events of Isstvan V

'Kill me then, "Emperor". Better to die in freedom's twilight than draw breath at the dawn of tyranny. May the gods grant me my last wish: that my spirit lingers long enough to laugh when your faithless kingdom at last falls apart.'

— Daival Shan, Terran separatist warlord, at his execution.

'If a man gathers ten thousand suns in his hands… If a man seeds a hundred thousand worlds with his sons and daughters, granting them custody of the galaxy itself… If a man guides a million vessels between the infinite stars with a mere thought… Then I pray you tell me, if you are able, how such a man is anything less than a god.'

— Lorgar Aurelian, Primarch of the Word Bearers

'There is no surer sign of decay in a country than to see the rites of religion held in contempt.'

— Nikollo Makiavelli, Ancient Eurasian philosopher

PROLOGUE

The Grey Warrior

HIS SISTERS WEPT when the Legion came for him. At the time, he couldn't understand why. There was no greater honour than to be chosen, so their sorrow made no sense.

The grey warrior's voice was a machine's rasp, deep and laden with static as he spoke from behind a death mask. He demanded to know the boy's name.

Before the mother answered him, she asked a question of her own. It was her way to stand straight and strong, never to be bowed by the things she saw. It was a strength she had passed on to her son, and would stay in his blood despite the many changes to come.

She asked the question with a smile. 'I will tell you his name, warrior. But first, will you tell me yours?'

The grey warrior looked down upon the family, meeting the eyes of the parents only once before he stole their child.

'Erebus,' he intoned. 'My name is Erebus.'

'Thank you, Lord Erebus. This is my son,' she gestured to her boy. 'Argel Tal.'

I

False Angels

I remember the Day of Judgement.

Can you imagine looking up and seeing the stars fall from the sky? Can you imagine the heavens themselves raining fire upon the world below?

You say you can picture it. I don't believe you. I'm not speaking of war. I'm not speaking of promethium's stinging oil-scent, or the burning chemical reek of flames born from missile fire. Forget battle's crude pains and the sensory assault of orbital bombardment. I am not speaking of mundane savagery – the incendiary ills men inflict upon other men.

I speak of judgement. Divine judgement.

The wrath of a god who looks upon the works of an entire world, and what he sees turns his heart sour. In his disgust, he sends flights of angels to deliver damnation. In his rage, he seeds the skies with fire and rains destruction upon the upturned faces of six billion worshippers.

Now tell me again. Tell me again that you can imagine seeing the stars fall from the sky. Tell me you can imagine heaven weeping fire upon the land below, and a city burning so bright that all sight is scorched from your eyes as you watch it die.

The Day of Judgement stole my eyes, but I can still illuminate you. I remember it all, and why wouldn't I? It was the last thing I ever saw.

They came to us in skyborne vultures of blue iron and white fire.

And they called themselves the XIII Legion. The Warrior-Kings of Ultramar.

We did not use those names. As they marched us from our homes, as they butchered those who dared to fight back, and as they poured divine annihilation upon everything we had built…

We called them false angels.

You came to me asking how my faith survived the Day of Judgement. I will tell you a secret. When the stars fell, when the seas boiled and the earth burned, my faith didn't die. That is when I began to believe.

God was real, and he hated us.

— Excerpted from 'The Pilgrimage', by Cyrene Valantion

ONE

The Perfect City
False Angels
Day of Judgement

THE FIRST FALLING star came down in the heart of the perfect city.

The crowds were always dense and boisterous in the plaza's midnight markets, yet everything fell silent when the sky wept fiery trails and the stars fell to earth in a stately drift.

The crowds parted, forming a ring around the huge arrival as it came down. Only when it came closer could the people see the truth. It wasn't a star at all. It wasn't formed of fire – it was breathing it from howling engines.

A smoke cloud drifted out from the downed craft, stinking of scorched oil and off-world chemicals. The ship's hull was viciously avian, a raptor's body of cobalt blue and dull gold. Its underbelly gleamed orange, bright with the hissing heat of orbital descent.

Cyrene Valantion was one of the gathered crowd, and three weeks shy of her eighteenth birthday. Whispers started up around her – whispers that became chants, chants that became prayers.

Jagged thunder echoed from nearby streets and plazas – the grumble of great engines and wheezing boosters. More of the stars-that-were-not-stars came raining down from heaven. The very air rattled with the hum of so many engines. Each breath tasted of exhaust.

The dark-hulled emissary from the sky was emblazoned with the symbol of the Holy Eagle, fire-blackened from its dive through the atmosphere. Cyrene's vision twinned, blurring between what she was seeing now and what she'd seen in artistic renderings in childhood. She was far from being one of the faithful, but she knew this craft, elaborately brought to life in pictures of vibrant inks on scrolls of parchment. Such imagery was scattered throughout the scriptures.

And she knew why the elders in the crowd were weeping and chanting. They recognised it too, but not merely from the holy codices. Decades ago, they'd borne witness to the same vehicles arriving from heaven.

Cyrene watched as people fell to their knees, lifting their hands to the starry skies and weeping in prayer.

'They have returned,' one old woman was murmuring. She spared a moment from her obeisance to claw at Cyrene's flowing *shuhl* robe. 'On your knees, ignorant whore!'

By now, the whole crowd was chanting. When the old woman reached for her leg again, Cyrene shook herself free of the hag's wrinkled talon.

'Please don't touch me,' Cyrene said. It was tradition never to touch those who wore red *shuhl* robes without first gaining the maiden's permission. In her fervency, the old woman ignored the ancient custom. Her fingernails raked the younger woman's skin through the street dress's thin silk.

'On your knees. They have returned!'

Cyrene went for the *qattari* knife strapped to her naked thigh. Slender, ornamented steel gleamed amber in the firelight reflected from the sky-craft.

'Don't. Touch. Me.'

With a hissed curse, the old woman returned to her prayers.

Cyrene took a deep breath, seeking to slow her frenetic pulse. The air heated her throat, prickling at her tongue with the charcoal spice of thruster smoke. So they had returned. The angels of the God-Emperor had returned to the perfect city.

She didn't feel the rush of reverence. Nor did she fall to her knees and thank the God-Emperor for his angels' second coming. Cyrene Valantion stared at the vulture hull of the iron craft, while one question burned behind her eyes.

'They have returned,' the old woman murmured again. 'They have returned to us.'

'Yes,' said Cyrene. 'But why?'

Movement from the craft came without warning. Thick doors clanged wide and a ramp juddered down on squealing pneumatics. Between gasps and nervous weeping, the worshipful chanting grew louder. The people intoned prayers from the Word, and the last of those standing finally dropped to their knees. Cyrene was the only person left on her feet.

The first of the angels stepped from the thinning smoke cloud. Cyrene stared at the figure, her eyes narrowing despite the exalted rightness of the moment. A sliver of ice wormed through her blood.

As if one girl's whispered protest could possibly change what was happening, she breathed a single word.

'Wait.'

The angel's heavy armour was at immediate odds with the images from scripture. It stood unadorned by the holy parchments that should detail its holiness in flowing script, nor was it clad in the winter-grey of the God-Emperor's true angels. This one's armour, like the craft it emerged from, was a deep and beautiful cobalt, trimmed with bronze so polished it gleamed close to gold. Its eyes were slanted red slits in a stoic facemask.

'Wait…' Cyrene said again, louder this time. 'These are not the Bearers of the Word.'

The old woman hissed at her blasphemy, and spat on her bare feet. Cyrene ignored her. Her gaze never left the warrior armoured in cobalt, so subtly and distinctly different from the scriptures she'd been forced to study as a child.

The angel's brethren emerged from the dark interior of their landing craft and descended to the plaza. All wore armour of the

same blue. All of them carried great weapons too heavy for a mortal man to lift unaided.

'They are not the Bearers of the Word,' she raised her voice above the chanting. Several people kneeling around her replied with harsh whispers and potent curses. Cyrene was drawing breath to call out the accusation a third time when the angels, moving in inhuman unison, raised their weapons and aimed into the crowd of worshippers. The sight stole the breath from her throat.

The first angel spoke, its voice deep and raw, filtered through hidden speakers in its facemask.

'People of Monarchia, capital city of Forty-Seven Ten, hear these words. We, the warriors of the XIII Legion, are oathed to this moment, honour-sworn to this duty. We come bearing the Emperor's decree to the tenth world brought to compliance by the Forty-Seventh Expedition of humanity's Great Crusade.'

All the while, the dozen angels kept their weapons aimed at the kneeling civilians. Cyrene could see the muzzles were as charred as the vulture craft's hull, darkened from firing shells of monstrous size.

'Your compliance with the Imperium of the Man has held for sixty-one years. With the greatest regret, the Emperor of Mankind demands that all living souls abandon the city of Monarchia immediately. Moments ago, your planetary leaders were given the same warning. This city is to be evacuated within six days. On the final day, your planetary leaders will be allowed to send a single distress call.'

The crowd kept silent, but their stares were now of confusion and disbelief, not reverence. As if sensing a drift in their attention, the angel aimed its weapon into the air and fired a single shot. The gunshot banged like a thunder peal rolling around a valley, storm-loud in the silence.

'No one is to remain in Monarchia by dawn of the seventh day. Go now to your homes. Gather your belongings. Evacuate the city. Resistance will be met with bloodshed.'

'Where will we go?' a female voice called from the transfixed crowd. 'This is our home!'

The first angel turned his weapon, aiming directly at Cyrene. It took several seconds for the young woman to realise she'd been the one to speak. It took much less time for those near her to break and flee, leaving her in an ever-expanding patch of sudden isolation.

The angel repeated its words, its emotionless inflection no different from before. *'No one is to remain in Monarchia by dawn of the seventh day. Go now to your homes. Gather your belongings. Evacuate the city. Resistance will be met with bloodshed.'*

Cyrene swallowed, saying nothing more. Cries and jeers rang out from the crowd. A bottle crashed against one of the angels' helms, shattering into glass rain, and as several others shouted out demands to know what was happening, Cyrene turned and ran. Where the crowd wasn't already fleeing with her, she forced her way through the press of people.

The throaty chatter of the angels' weapons started up a handful of seconds later, as the God-Emperor's messengers opened fire on the rioting crowd.

THREE DAYS LATER, Cyrene was still in the city.

Like many of the people calling Monarchia home, Cyrene's dusky skin was a legacy of her ancestors' lives in the equatorial deserts, and she had handsome eyes of a light brown that were rather like burnt auburn. Sun-lightened hazel hair fell in tumbling locks over her shoulders.

At least, her more infatuated lovers described her in such terms.

This was the picture her mind painted, though she no longer saw it when she looked in the mirror. Now her eyes were ringed from two nights without sleep, and her mouth was soured by dehydration.

Exactly how things had come to this point remained a mystery. Across the city, resistance to the invaders had been ferocious for the hour or so it had lasted. The greatest massacre had taken place at the Tophet Gate, when the protests became a riot, and the riot became a battlefield. Cyrene watched from the haven of a nearby church, though there hadn't been much to see. Citizens

cut down and culled, all for the crime of daring to defend their homes.

A battle tank of cobalt and bronze fired at the Tophet Gate itself, and though the slaughter was a tragedy, this was raw desecration. Grinding the dead beneath its treads, the tank fired a salvo at the towering structure. Its cannons left pain-scars across Cyrene's sight, but she couldn't look away.

The Tophet Gate fell, its marble bulk breaking into segments after it pounded into the plaza. A fortune in white stone and gold leaf, a monument to the God-Emperor's true angels, shattered by invaders claiming to be loyal to the Imperium.

Cyrene could make out the unmoving bodies of fallen statues, toppled from the fallen gate. She knew them well, having attended many midnight markets in Tophet Plaza. Each time, marble angels had stared down at her from their places carved into the gate's surface. Slanted, featureless eyes watched without blinking. Wingless suits of armour were rendered with exquisite skill in the smooth stone. These were not the false, feathered angels of ancient Terran myth, but holiness incarnate – the angels of death – formed in the fearful aspect of the God-Emperor. His shadows, his sons, the Bearers of the Word.

Through the dust, heretic silhouettes drifted closer to the tank. 'The Warrior-Kings of Ultramar', Cyrene had murmured in that moment. 'The XIII Legion.'

Blasphemers, all. Their resemblance to the Bearers of the Word only compounded their impurity.

Planetary vox was down. She'd heard from a street vendor that the invaders destroyed all of Khur's satellites before they came through the clouds. True or not, contact with other cities – even within Monarchia itself – was limited to word of mouth.

'They rose up in Quami District,' the vendor insisted. 'Not just Tophet. Gulshia, too. Hundreds dead. Perhaps thousands.' He shrugged as if such things were mere curiosities. 'I'm leaving tonight. There's no hope fighting devils, *shuhl-asha*.'

Cyrene said nothing, though she smiled at his gentlemanly use of her profession's archaic title. But what was there to say? The

invaders had the city in lockdown. The seeds of rebellion would never take root in such unfertile ground.

District by district, the exodus from Monarchia began after those first purges. Once the gates were opened, a ceaseless flood of humanity spilled from the city.

By nightfall, the mass evacuation was fully underway. Monarchia's wealthiest citizens – most of them merchants or high-ranking clergymen serving as Speakers of the Word – secured their own transportation, leaving the city for secondary estates in other towns. The morning air above Monarchia was dense with shuttlecraft boosting away to other havens, ferrying the rich, the important, the economically vital and the spiritually enlightened to sanctuary elsewhere.

Cyrene hadn't left yet. In truth, she wasn't certain she would leave. She stood on the balcony of her second-floor habitation pod – somewhere between a room and a cell in the Jiro Apartment Block, in one of the cheapest parts of town.

The nearby speaker towers blared their message, over and over. *'Strict weight allowances are in effect for personal belongings on the evacuation craft. All residents of Inaga District are to report to Yael-Shah Skyport or the Twelfth Trade Gate immediately. Strict weight allowances are…'*

Cyrene tuned out the warnings, watching the people flocking through the streets below, strangling traffic with their slow, marching queues. There, at the end of the street, one of the XIII Legion directed the herds of people like livestock. In its hands, the false angel carried the same weapon as its brothers, the massive rifle with its supply of explosive ammunition.

Cyrene leaned on the balcony's railing, bearing witness to the eternal theatre of oppressor and oppressed, of conquerors and the conquered. Her district was due to be evacuated by tomorrow morning. The process was stilted, with a great deal of curses cried and lamentations heaped upon the silent false angels.

'Strict weight allowances are in effect,' the speakers boomed again. Those vox-towers had been used for the city's thrice-daily prayer readings, speaking words of tolerance and enlightenment to all

sheltering within the city. Now their holiness was perverted, as they served as the invaders' mouthpieces.

Too late, Cyrene saw she'd been noticed.

The air turned thicker and hotter from engine wash, as a small skycraft drifted over the street at the same level as her balcony. A two-man vehicle, its skin formed from sloping blue armour, was suspended on whining turbines as it weaved through the air. The false angels seated in its cockpit scanned the second-level windows of the buildings as they passed.

Cyrene's shiver threatened to become a tremble, yet she remained where she was.

The craft hovered closer. Rotor fans blew hot air from the craft's anti-gravitational engines. The false angel in the gunner seat leaned forward, adjusting a hidden control on his armour's collar.

'Citizen,' the warrior's vox-voice was a raw bark over the speeder craft's engine. *'This sector is being evacuated. Proceed to street level immediately.'*

Cyrene took a breath, and didn't move.

The warrior glanced at his companion in the pilot's seat, then looked back to Cyrene in her quiet defiance.

'Citizen, this sector is being evac—'

'I heard you,' Cyrene said, loud enough to carry over the craft's infernal din.

'Proceed to street level immediately,' the warrior said.

'Why are you doing this?' she asked, her voice still raised.

The gunner shook his head and gripped the handles of the massive calibre weapon mount, aiming it directly at Cyrene. The young woman swallowed – the gun's muzzle was the size of her head. Every bone in her body gave a panic-twinge, pleading she run.

'Why are you doing this?' she demanded, drowning her fear with anger. 'What sins have stained us all, that we must leave our homes? We are loyal to the Imperium! We are loyal to the God-Emperor!'

The false angels remained unmoving for several seconds. Cyrene closed her eyes, waiting for the hammer-hard impact that would spell her destruction. Despite the moment, she felt a smile tickling her lips. This was an insane way to die. There'd be nothing left to bury.

'Citizen.'

She opened her eyes. The warrior had lowered the cannon's aim. *'The Emperor, beloved by all, ordered the XIII Legion here and mandated our actions. Look at us. Look upon our armour, and the weapons we bear. We are his warriors, and we do his will. Proceed to street level and evacuate the district.'*

'The God-Emperor demanded that we abandon our lives?'

The warrior snarled. It was a crackling machine-growl, only rendered human by the hint of anger within. This was the first emotion Cyrene had heard from the invaders.

'Proceed to street level.' The warrior brought the cannon to bear again. *'Now. I will slay you where you stand if you cast your ignorant heathen words once more over the name of the Emperor, beloved by all.'*

Cyrene spat over the side of the balcony. 'I will go, only because I seek illumination. I will find the truth in all this, and I pray there will come a reckoning.'

'The truth will be revealed,' the warrior said, as the craft made ready to hover away. *'At sunrise on the seventh day, turn and look back to your city. You will witness the illumination you crave.'*

AND SO DAWNED the seventh day.

The lightening sky found Cyrene Valantion standing atop a rise in the Galahe Foothills, her traditional dress hidden beneath a long jacket clutched tightly against the worsening autumn wind. Her hair blew free in a mane, and she watched the utterly silent, utterly still city to the east. In the last hours, burning blurs had floated upwards: each one a landing craft belonging to the XIII Legion, each one returning to the heavens now that their warriors' work was done.

With creeping inevitability, the sun reached the horizon. Pale gold – cold for all its gentle brightness – spilled over the minarets

and domes of Monarchia. A city of unrivalled beauty, the spear-tips of its ten thousand towers turned golden by the dawn.

'Holy Blood,' the young woman whispered, unable to find her voice and feeling the wet warmth of tear trails on her cheeks. To think that mankind could create such marvels. 'Holy Blood of the God-Emperor.'

The sky grew brighter still – too bright, too fast. Barely past dawn, it was already becoming as bright as noon.

Cyrene raised her head, watching with weeping eyes as the clouds of heaven lit up with a second sunrise.

She saw the fire fall from the sky, lances of unbelievable light spearing into the perfect city from above the clouds. But she did not watch for long. The sun-spears' incomparable brightness stole her sight after only the first few moments, leaving her in darkness as she listened to the sounds of a city dying. The world shook beneath Cyrene's feet, casting her to the ground. Worst of all, her eyes itched as they failed, and the last clear sight she ever saw was Monarchia in ruin, its towers falling into the flames.

Blind and betrayed by fate, Cyrene Valantion cried out to the heavens and prayed for a reckoning, while the city of her birth burned.

II

The Last Prayer

'Bearers of the Word, hear our prayer.

False angels walk in our midst, cast in your image but bringing none of your mercy. They call themselves the XIII Legion, the Warrior-Kings of Ultramar, and have spoken only threats of bloodshed and sorrow since they darkened the skies a week before. Their warriors have walked the streets of Monarchia, forcing the people to abandon the city. Those who resisted were butchered. Fate willing, they will be remembered as martyrs.

Monarchia is not alone. Sixteen cities across the planet stand empty, likewise swept clean of life.

For many days, we were silenced, unable to call out to you. The XIII Legion has allowed us this moment, in the hours before the last dawn. They have vowed to end the perfect city in a storm of fire as the sun rises this very day. Return to us, we beg you. Return to us and make them answer for this injustice. Avenge the fallen, and restore what will be lost when the horizon lightens.

Bearers of the Word, hear our prayer.

Return to us, sons of the God-Emperor, blessings upon His Name. Retur—'

— First and only distress call sent from Monarchia, capital of Khur.

TWO

Serrated Sun
Devastation
Aurelian

CYRENE'S RECKONING TOOK two months to arrive. Almost nine weeks of lancing headlong through the tides of unspace, breaking through the immaterium with little thought of safety or control. They lost vessels. They lost lives. But they lost no time. Reality trembled in their wake.

The first ship to burst from the immaterium ripped back into reality on tormented engines. As it accelerated from the wound of re-entry, it seemed cast from the warp like a grey spear, trailing plasma mist the colour of madness. Its engines roared heavy and hot into the silence of space.

Along its ridged spine, statues of marble and gold stared out into the starry void. Armoured buildings of worship rose like overlaid carbuncles from the vessel's skin. Battlements lined the walls of those cathedrals, and dozens of lesser temples were decorated with banks of weapon turrets in their tallest towers. The vessel, terrible in size and grim in aspect, was more a bastion city of prayer and warfare than a spaceborne vessel.

Its dangerous momentum sent shudders through its metal bones, and still it didn't slow down. Blue-white engine wash streamed in disintegrating smoke trails from immense boosters that had taken decades to construct, by thousands of labourers working millions of hours. The ship's prow was fashioned into a colossal ram – an eagle figurehead, wrought in dense metals polished to a silver sheen. In its talons, the eagle held the steel-

forged icon of an open book. The beast's head was frozen open in a silent shriek. Its cold eyes reflected the stars.

Other ships arrived, rending reality, breaking from the warp as lesser blurs of grey – a volley of arrows that eclipsed the stars around them. A few at first, then a dozen, soon a fleet, at last an armada… A hundred and sixteen ships, one of the greatest coalitions of force the human race had ever assembled. And still more arrived, savaging the layer between realms, dropping from the immaterium, attempting to race alongside their glorious flagship.

The grey armada moved in loose formation, the slower vessels falling behind as over a hundred ships closed in on a single blue-green world.

A world already surrounded by another battlefleet.

ONE OF THE armada's vessels – a ship mighty enough in its own right, but utterly dwarfed by the flagship at the fleet's vanguard – was the battle-barge *De Profundis.* In Low Gothic, its name translated with ragged eloquence into *'Out of the Depths'*. In the Colchisian dialect of the warship's home world, it translated from those proto-Gothic roots as *'From Despair'*.

The terminal shuddering through the ship's bones lessened with realspace reasserting its hold, and temporal engines took over from the overheated warp thrusters. The captain of *De Profundis* rose from his ornate command throne as his ship threw off the empyrean's lingering shackles. The throne itself was carved ivory and black steel, draped with devotional parchment scrolls and taking up the centre of a raised dais. On the tiered steps leading up to his throne stood three other figures, each clad in the same granite grey battle armour, each one with their gazes cast at the display occulus taking up the entire forward wall.

The scene unfolding on the visual screen was one of unrivalled chaos. Order was breaking down before the fleet even engaged the enemy, as if the anger of every captain bled freely into the trajectories of their vessels, breeding irrationality where focus was needed.

The Chapter Master's armour thrummed with energy, its exposed cabling connected to the back-mounted power pack. Ornate beyond many other suits of Astartes warplate, the personal armour of Chapter Master Deumos was unashamedly brazen in its declaration of his accomplishments. Detailed in engravings etched onto his pauldrons was a recording written in Colchisian cuneiform, the runic script listing his victories and kill-counts in poetic verse. Emblazoned on his left shoulder guard and overlaying the runic poetry was an open book sculpted from bronze, with its pages aflame. Each tongue of fire was hand-carved from red iron, welded with artful craft onto the book itself. In the right light, the metal pages seemed to flicker with iron flame.

Lastly, ringing one of the slanted red eye lenses of his snarling helm, was a stylised, spiked star of brass. It was a symbol repeated across the hull and spinal buildings of the *De Profundis*, heralding the battle-barge as the vessel of the Chapter of the Serrated Sun. Each ship in the fleet bore its own unique sigils – the Osseous Throne, the Crescent Moon, the Coiled Lash… symbol upon symbol, a stream of signifiers. Here, in the void, they were scattered like the hieroglyphs on a shaman's runestones.

The eyes of every warrior, officer, serf and slave were fixed upon the planet of Khur, and the capital city that had once been visible from space. In a sense, it still was: an ashen stain blackening a quarter of a continent.

Deumos's features could easily have been hewn from the metamorphic rock of Terra's ancient Himalayan mountain range, not far from where he'd had been born two hundred years ago. Some men laughed, and laughed often. Deumos was not one of them. His humour ran along bleaker lines.

One of his subordinates, the Seventh Captain by rank, had once told him that his scarred face was a 'chronicle of wars no one wished to fight'. Deumos smiled at the recollection. He was fond of Argel Tal's attempts at wit.

Breaking from the momentary indulgence of reverie, Deumos regarded the occulus, still unsure exactly what he was bearing witness to. The rest of their ships spread out in loose attack for-

mation, many of them still accelerating. The outriders and scouts were slowing significantly, their momentum dying as the rage of their engines faded.

'What am I watching?' Deumos asked. His helm emitted the words as a crackling growl. 'Auspex, report.'

'Initial auspex reports are filtering in now.' The officers by the three-faced scanner table were all human, their uniforms the same stark grey as the Chapter Master's armour. Their senior rating, the Master of Auspex, had gone pale. 'I… I…'

The Chapter Master turned his glare on the humans. 'Speak, and speak quickly,' he said.

'The enemy fleet in geostationary orbit above Monarchia registers as Imperial, sir.'

'So it's true.' Deumos stared hard at the Master of Auspex, an ageing officer with a strong voice, who was frantically adjusting tuning dials on a display screen three metres square. 'Speak.'

'They're Imperial, confirmed. They're not the enemy. A host of transponder codes are flooding the sensors, actively broadcast. They're announcing themselves to the entire fleet.'

The tension still didn't bleed from Deumos. Instead, it wormed deeper into his thoughts, dredging the memory of that maddening message to the fore. *Return to us,* it had pleaded. *They call themselves the XIII Legion. Return to us, we beg you.*

Deumos let the disquiet sink back into the calmer sediment of his mind. He needed to focus.

He watched the occulus as grey-hulled ships slowed, their wide-mouthed engines breathing diminished flares. Several vessels veered away from the rest of the fleet, breaking the elegance of the attack formation. Doubt, most definitely. No captain could know what to do.

The perfect, regimented anger of the assault run was crumbling, unsalvageable with so many vessels slowing and breaking away. All around them, the colossal fleet on the edge of open warfare collapsed, powering down their weapons. As an astral ballet, it was running through these final anticlimactic motions with clear

reluctance. Again came the sense of the ships' captains infecting their vessels with emotion.

The planet itself was close, close enough for the enemy fleet to edge into visual range. At this distance, they were little more than dark specks framed by dense cloud cover, hanging in low orbit. Deumos turned to his brothers, his subordinates, each one of them standing on the lesser steps of his raised dais.

'Now we discover the truth in all this.'

'Today will end in darkness,' this from the Seventh Captain, his left eye ringed by the serrated sun. 'We know the truth, we know what our brothers have done. No explanation will quench the primarch's sorrow. No reasoning will quell his rage. You know this as well as I, master.'

Deumos nodded. He'd indulged a moment of concern that the *Lex* wouldn't slow down, that it would drive like a grey blade into the heart of the opposing fleet, its weapon batteries aflame as they sang their lethal songs. Brother against brother, Astartes against Astartes.

Once, he would have smiled at the delicious blasphemy of an impossible idea. Not now.

'We're being hailed,' one of the vox-officers called from his console.

At last. A fleet-wide message, from the only voice that mattered. The message was relayed across the bridge, ruined by vox-breakage but recognisable nonetheless.

'My sons.' No amount of distortion could conceal the hurt and affection in the words. *'My sons, we have reached Khur. The last prayer from Monarchia must now be answered. Today we witness with our own eyes the ruin our brothers have made of the perfect city.'*

The four Astartes warriors around the command throne shared a glance, though their expressions remained hidden behind their Mark III helms. Each of them heard the tremor in their father's voice.

'My sons,' the message continued. *'Blood demands blood. We will have the answers we seek before the day is done. This, I swear t—'*

The message didn't end, it was cut off. An overriding signal took hold of the vox-network, powerful enough to eclipse the words of the Legion's own primarch.

This voice was deeper, colder, and just as sincere.

'Warriors of the Word Bearers. I am Guilliman of the XIII Legion, Lord of Macragge. You are ordered to descend to the surface immediately and muster in the heart of the razed site once known as Monarchia. Coordinates are being conveyed. There will be no defiance of this mandate. Your Legion, in its entirety, will gather as ordered. That is all.'

The voice ceased, and silence reigned.

Almost a hundred souls – human, servitor and Astartes – gathered on the bridge of *De Profundis.* None of them spoke a word for almost a full minute.

Without even acknowledging the others, the Seventh Captain turned and stalked across the chamber, his armoured boots thudding on the plasteel decking.

'Argel Tal?' Deumos spoke into his helm's vox-link. His visor display tracked his subordinate captain, scrolling white text feeds of biorhythmic data across his vision. He blinked at a peripheral rune to clear the automatic tactical display.

The Seventh Captain turned, making the sign of the holy aquila over his chest, his gauntlets forming the God-Emperor's symbol over the polished breastplate.

'I go to ready Seventh Company for planetfall,' he said. 'The answers we seek are on the surface of Khur, in the ruins of the perfect city. I want those answers, Deumos.'

THE AIR WAS gritty, thickened by dust and smoke haze. The ground was a black ash desert, with heat-seared patches of glass and melted marble that reflected the sunlight until they were crunched underfoot.

Argel Tal breathed in, tasting the recycled filtration of his own suit – the sweat, the chemical tang of his gene-enhanced blood – but he couldn't bring himself to seal his suit completely. Each breath drew in a penitent trace of the brimstone and scorched rock reek of the surrounding devastation.

Nothing was left standing. Stone powder in the air, the result of a million pulverised marble buildings, was already coating their armour as the Word Bearers stood in the heart of Monarchia. Oath parchments and prayer scrolls attached to Astartes warplate turned a grey-white with settling dust. Argel Tal watched his warriors standing amidst the ruination – some picking through debris with no real intent, others simply remaining motionless – and he searched for the words this moment required.

Whatever those words were, they escaped him for now.

The vox crackled live, and Xaphen's identifier rune flashed on the edge of Argel Tal's red-tinted retinal display.

'We stood here, six decades ago.' Xaphen came to his captain's side, his rare, gold-trimmed armour greyed by the falling dust. For once, the Chaplain of the 7th Company resembled his brothers, rendering every warrior equal as they stood among Monarchia's bones. 'Now the city is drowning in clouds of dust, but we stood in this very place. Do you recall it?' Xaphen asked.

Argel Tal stared out at the annihilated terrain, seeing ghosts in the mist – the spires and domes of buildings that no longer existed.

'I remember,' he said. 'This was the public plaza of Inaga Sector.' The captain gestured south, though every direction offered nothing but the same ravaged landscape. 'There stood the Tophet Gate, where the preachers and traders gathered.'

Xaphen nodded. His left eye bore the same mark as Argel Tal's: the serrated star, symbol of a shared brotherhood. The weapon mag-locked to his back – a ritual crozius arcanum, the war maul of Word Bearer Chaplains – was forged in the same shape. Its hammerhead was a spiked sphere of dark iron, threaded with silver.

The conversation, such as it was, ebbed to nothing until the unwelcome serenity was broken by another company making planetfall. On howling thrusters, gunships made their final approaches, clawed landing feet crunching onto the fire-blasted ground. Usually, the flame-and-oil stench of their engine ex-

hausts would assault the senses. Here, it was undetectable among the ruin already inflicted.

Bulkheads and ramps clanged open. Another hundred warriors in the etched armour of the XVII Legion took their first steps into the dead city. What little formation existed broke almost immediately as the Astartes scattered, struggling to come to terms with what they were seeing. Argel Tal blink-clicked a vox rune on his visor display, tuning into the general channel again. These new arrivals, wearing the heraldry of 15th Company, voiced their breathless disbelief and impotent anger. Their chestplates were marked with the sigil of heaped human skulls, the Chapter of the Osseous Throne.

Argel Tal offered a quiet greeting. The closest warriors saluted, respecting his rank despite his allegiance to another Chapter. Body and blood, every one of them was a Bearer of the Word. That outweighed all else.

Still more Thunderhawks streaked overhead, the gunships seeking clear ground to land. Between the warriors already on the surface and the gunships remaining where they'd landed, it was becoming a trial to deploy more of the Legion. East to west, north to south, the sky was a mess of shaking gunships and the heat-shimmers of engines struggling to keep the Thunderhawks airborne.

Every few minutes, the sky would fall dark, heralding the passage of a Stormbird. These largest landers carried entire companies, their deafening passing temporarily blocking out the sun.

Argel Tal walked without purpose, crushing ruined rock underfoot. He sealed his armour's ventilation systems when he grew tired of inhaling the sulphuric stench of Monarchia's grave. Melted rock and scorched earth were never easy on the nose, and the captain's gene-enhanced olfactory senses were pained by the intensity. Breathing the recycled air of his suit's internal filters, he walked on.

The ground was uneven, pounded into blackened craters by the Ultramarines' orbital assault. Argel Tal felt his suit's stabiliser pistons and gravity gyros shifting to compensate. There were

brief hums of power as the mechanics in his armour's knees and shins adjusted to new patches of uneven terrain.

He knew Xaphen was following him even without looking at the digital distance tracker on his retinal display. It was no surprise when the Chaplain spoke again.

'I feel as though we've lost a war without firing a single shot,' the Chaplain voxed. 'But look to the skies, brother. Our father comes.'

The sky grew dark once more, and Argel Tal looked upward as the final Stormbird flew overhead. Its hull was gold, reflecting the midday sun in a spray of solar glare. The captain's visor dimmed to compensate.

With greater clarity came the revelation of shame. Smaller gunships, Thunderhawks with hulls of blue, flew in formation around the mighty golden Stormbird. An escort squadron: watchmen, not honour guards. The Ultramarines were escorting the Word Bearers' primarch down to the surface with all the undignified pageantry of a prisoner being led to execution.

Argel Tal's visor zoomed in, responding to his narrowed eyes. Static fuzzed for half a second, quickly clearing as his eye lenses refocused at the new range.

Every turret on the Ultramarines gunships was trained on the golden hull of the Word Bearers Stormbird.

'Do you see that?' he voxed to Xaphen.

'An insult like that is hard to miss,' the Chaplain replied. 'I'd believe it a lie, had I not seen it myself.'

Argel Tal watched the lander's arc taking it deeper into the city, and without any other signal, every Word Bearer nearby turned and walked in the direction set by the massive gunship.

'This has the stench of history in the making,' Xaphen muttered. 'Gird your soul, brother. Mind your humours.'

The captain had never heard the layer of unease in Xaphen's voice before. It was not helping his own fragile calm.

'Answers,' Argel Tal replied, bringing up retinal readouts of bolter ammunition supplies, along with his armour's power-pack temperature. 'Answers, Xaphen. That's all I want.'

Argel Tal and Xaphen led Seventh Company into the heart of the city, marching to where the Legion gathered.

ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND warriors stood in silence beneath the setting sun.

One hundred thousand warriors in perfect formation, bolters held in grey fists, helmed heads raised in pride. A hundred thousand pairs of red eye lenses stared ahead. Squad by squad, led by sergeants. Company by company, led by captains. Chapter by Chapter, led by Masters.

Standard bearers stood before each company, banners held high even as their details faded in the dust. Borne by Sergeant Malnor, the Serrated Sun Chapter icon rose alongside the war banners of its three component companies, eclipsing them in both size and significance. A spiked circle of burnished bronze mirrored the symbol around every warrior's left eye, decorated with sixty-eight bleached skulls hanging on black iron chains. The skulls were human and alien, each one the head of a fallen enemy champion worthy of remembrance. The left eye socket of every skull was ringed by the serrated sun symbol, painted with Astartes blood, blessed by the company Chaplains.

Similar icons were held above the mustered Legion. They rattled in the wind, trinkets chiming in grim melody, while the company war banners waved.

Argel Tal moved forward with the other commanders of the Serrated Sun, leaving their warriors in assembled columns. Although the Chapter was far from the primarch's favour – such honour belonged to the larger and more prestigious Chapters made from twenty or more companies – their ranks still entitled them to stand at the forefront of the gathered Legion.

As he walked through ranks of statue-still Word Bearers, Argel Tal switched to the vox frequency secured by Seventh Company prior to planetfall.

'Stand tall, brothers. Enlightenment will soon be ours.'

A series of ten vox-clicks signalled the acknowledgement of every squad sergeant under his command.

Several captains voxed quiet greetings as they assembled in an ordered line, their helms and shoulder guards marked with evidence of their own Chapter allegiances.

Before them all, the golden Stormbird stood at bay, resting in the midst of six Ultramarines Thunderhawk gunships. The edges of their ceramite hulls were scorched bare in places from the fires of atmospheric descent.

One captain broke ranks. He took a single step forward, and Argel Tal felt the ground's miniscule tremor as the warrior moved.

In hulking Terminator armour, the silver-wrought warplate still fresh from the forges of Mars, First Captain Kor Phaeron stood apart from his brothers, as was his right. In the armour of the Legion's elite, he towered a metre above the lesser captains, clad in layers of reverently sculpted ceramite as thick as the hull-skin of a battle tank. He carried no weapons beyond those his armour already offered: oversized gauntlets ending in talons extending from each finger, the individual blades as long and curved as the primitive scythes used to harvest crops on backwater Imperial worlds. Delicate circuitry threaded along the blades – veins of power that would invest the claws with crackling force upon the First Captain's desire.

Unlike the gathered captains, Kor Phaeron wore no helm, and it was fair to say no poet or painter could ever portray the First Captain as a handsome being without liberal artistic license. Argel Tal watched Kor Phaeron's finger-blades ripple with electric current, a sure sign of impatience. The larger warrior's expression was locked in the sneer of a man who tastes nothing but bitterness and ash, which was the only face Argel Tal had ever seen him wear. Despite the impressive armour, Kor Phaeron's visage was corpse-gaunt and bone-pale, as it had been on each of the rare occasions the two captains crossed paths.

'I hate him,' Xaphen whispered over the vox. 'He wears that armour as a shield for one thousand weaknesses. I hate him, brother.'

Argel Tal remained unmoving, bolter across his chest. He'd heard this from the Chaplain many times before, and could offer no answer to ease his friend's choler.

'I know,' he said, hoping Xaphen would fall silent. This was hardly the time for such things.

'He is not one of us. A false Astartes.' Xaphen fell into the familiar lament with teeth-clenching passion. 'He is *impure*.'

'This is not the time for old grudges.'

'Laxity like that is why you will never carry a crozius,' the Chaplain said.

The nepotism behind Kor Phaeron's ascension to the First Captaincy was no secret. As the primarch's spiritual counsel and foster father during the years of Lorgar's youth away from the Imperium, Kor Phaeron had helped shape the growing demigod in ways his true father had not. They stood together through the years of sacrifice and revolution, through the holy wars that threatened to tear Colchis apart before its unity under the benevolent rule of Lorgar.

When the God-Emperor came to Colchis over a century before to offer Lorgar command of the XVII Legion, Kor Phaeron had been far too old to receive the organ implantations and prepubescent genetic manipulations necessary to grow into one of the Astartes. Instead, through rejuvenat surgery, costly bionics and limited gene-forging, Kor Phaeron was exalted above humanity as a sign of the value placed in him by the primarch.

Despite leaving humanity behind, he had not ascended to the ranks of true Astartes. Argel Tal watched him now, this pinnacle of genetic compromise. Respect stilled his tongue, even if admiration did not.

Kor Phaeron spat onto the broken ground. The acidic gobbet of saliva hissed as it ate into the ruined stone. Only then did Argel Tal reactivate the vox-channel to Xaphen by blink-clicking his brother's name-rune.

'Are you galled only by the First Captain's impurity? Or is it his complete lack of Legion discipline, and that his victories eclipse yours and mine put together?'

Xaphen chuckled, the sound low and dark. His crozius hammer was in his fists, its mace head resting on the ground.

'He is at the primarch's side for each campaign. He commands the First Company, the Legion's finest, and wears the armour of the Terminator elite. It would take a fool to fail in those circumstances.'

'I have heard him preach, brother. As have you. I do not like him, but I respect him. He speaks the Word with an insight possessed by no other, and his wisdom pours fire into my blood. He orchestrated victory in a planet-wide civil war when he was merely a human priest. Do not underestimate him now.'

Xaphen's voice was sterner. 'Impurity cannot be forgiven.'

'The primarch chose him,' the captain's tone also grew stonier in response. 'Does that mean nothing to you?'

'I do not doubt our father's judgement,' came the reluctant reply.

Just when Argel Tal sensed more to come, Xaphen fell silent, perhaps detecting an implied lecture in his brother's disapproval.

'Stand ready,' Kor Phaeron growled, his grinding voice at odds with his cadaverous face. 'The primarch comes.'

As those words hung in the air, the ramp beneath the cockpit of the golden Stormbird began to ease down on smooth gears.

Argel Tal breathed out, slow and tense, feeling his primary heart thud faster. Although he wasn't in battle, his secondary heart started a slower counter-beat to the hammering of his first.

The figure descended the ramp alone, and the Seventh Captain felt the stinging threat of worshipful tears even as he kept his gaze on the ruined ground. He'd not seen his primarch in almost three years. To be cast away from his radiance, even in the name of sacred duty, was to walk in shadow, devoid of inspiration.

The vox came alive with thousands of muted voices as countless Word Bearers breathed their father's name. Many thanked fate for the chance to stand within his presence once again. Reverent chants ghosted over the communication channels, never rising above whispers. Argel Tal was one of the few that remained silent at first, thanking fate in voiceless piety.

Three years. Three long, long years of fighting in the darkness, praying for this moment to come. All doubt, all concern, all suspicion of the Ultramarines' summons was erased in a dual beat of his twin hearts.

The figure stopped walking. Argel Tal knew this from the cessation of footsteps on blackened earth.

Only then did he speak. A single word: a name used only rarely beyond the warrior-sons who carried Lorgar's blood in their veins, as they conquered an ignorant galaxy by crozius and bolter.

'Aurelian,' the captain said, the word drowning in so many similar whispers.

Argel Tal raised his eyes at last, to see the son of a living god standing in the heart of a necropolis.

THREE

Blood Demands Blood
Sigillite
The Master of Mankind

THE SEVENTEENTH PRIMARCH was known to the emergent Imperium by many names. The worlds left in his Legion's triumphant wake knew him as the Anointed, the Seventeenth Son, or more elegantly, the Bearer of the Word.

To his primarch brothers he was simply Lorgar, the name given to him on his home world of Colchis during the years of turmoil before the Emperor's arrival.

Yet as with many primarchs, he also bore an informal title – a term of respect often used by the eighteen Legions. Where Fulgrim of the III Legion was known respectfully as the Phoenician, and Ferrus Manus of the X Legion carried the Gorgon as his title, the lord of the XVII Legion was the Urizen – a name pulled from the half-forgotten writings of ancient Terran myth.

None of the one hundred thousand warriors gathered spoke those names now. As the Word Bearers Legion stood at its full, unbelievable strength in perfectly ordered ranks, every one of his sons chanted his true name in sibilant whispers, as if the syllables were an invocation.

Aurelian, they breathed in unison. *Lorgar Aurelian,* Lorgar the Golden One. Thus was the father known to his chosen children.

The Seventeenth Primarch turned his gaze to the ocean of grey-armoured warriors bred to do his bidding. He seemed to pause, just for a moment, at the immensity of what he was seeing. Those closest to him saw the fires of thought light up his eyes.

'My sons,' he said, colouring the words with a smile tainted by sorrow. 'It lifts my heart to see you all.'

TO STARE AT one of the God-Emperor's sons was to drink in a vision of avataric perfection. Human senses, even the laboratory-forged perceptions of an Astartes warrior, struggled to process what they were seeing. When Argel Tal first stood before Lorgar as a boy still shy of his eleventh birthday, he had suffered nightmares of confusion and pain for a month.

The Legion's Apothecaries who watched over the infant recruits were prepared for this. Turyon, the Apothecary who oversaw Argel Tal's implantation surgeries during his pubescent years, had explained the phenomena to him in one of the tiny isolation cells granted to all Legion acolytes during their training.

'The nightmares are natural, and will fade in time. Your mind must come to terms with what you have seen.'

'I am not sure what I saw,' the boy admitted.

'You saw the son of a god. Mortal minds and eyes were never meant to witness such things. It will take time to adjust.'

'It hurts when I close my eyes. It hurts to remember him.'

'It will not hurt forever.'

'I want to serve him,' the eleven-year-old boy had promised, still trembling from the night's visions. 'I will serve him, I swear.'

Turyon had nodded, going on to speak of the many lethal trials ahead before he could wear the mantle of an Astartes. Argel Tal had listened to none of it – at least, not then, not that morning with the weak Colchisian sun bringing dawn to his single-windowed cell.

He still thought of Turyon. The Apothecary had died forty years before, and Argel Tal kept a memento of the battle. Even now, he could never hold the curved, broken alien blade without remembering Turyon's slashed throat.

In truth, that was why he kept it. Remembrance. A morbid habit, perhaps, and one the Chaplains had often chastised him for. It was the mark of an unhealthy mind to gather the weapons that slew one's brothers.

Argel Tal raised his eyes.

'Blood demands blood,' Lorgar said to the warriors gathered in Monarchia's cratered grave. 'Blood demands blood.'

As always when in his father's presence, Argel Tal rationed his gaze to focus upon individual details, rather than his gene-father's full manifestation.

Lorgar's eyes, the snowy grey of Colchis's winter skies, were ringed by kohl, setting them even brighter against the primarch's skin – skin that seemed golden to unvisored eyes.

Argel Tal's helm's eye lenses filtered everything to a world of dark-washed tactical readouts, but it stole none of the detail. He could make out the thousands of individual Colchisian glyphs gold-inked onto the primarch's white flesh. It was said the tattoos of cuneiform scripture covered most of Lorgar's body. Certainly, they trailed down his face in tight, perfect lines, from his shaved head to his jawline, each sentence a prayer of devotion, a prophetic hope for the future, or an invocation of strength from a higher power.

Where Lorgar's regalia hid his flesh, the writing continued over the golden plates of armour, acid-etched into the shining surfaces. Yet for all his majesty, the Seventeenth Primarch did not display his grandeur by ceremonial wargear. His armour may have been gold, but it was no more ornate than the Mark III plate worn by his captains. The oath papers and scrolls of scripture pinned to his breastplate and pauldrons told not of the primarch's own glory, but his vows to his father, and his devotion to serve the people of the Imperium.

'And so we come to this,' the primarch said, his voice never rising far above a whisper, because it never needed to. It reached the ears of his closest sons, and translated smoothly across the vox for the rear ranks.

'And so we come to this, yet still they make us wait for the answers we deserve.'

Human linguistics couldn't convey the fierce, soulful confidence Lorgar exuded. His slender lips were curled into the crooked half-smile of an impassioned poet, despite standing in

the grave of his greatest achievement. In his gauntleted hands, clutched in gold fists that seemed reluctant to raise the weapon, was a crozius the height of an Astartes warrior.

Illuminarum was the primarch's one concession to grandeur. The weapon's haft was the cream of ivory, reinforced by a grip of black iron. Its head was an orb of adamantium, stained black through a forgemaster's touch and decorated with silver-leafed runes. Evenly-spaced spikes the length of human forearms projected from its outer edges, lending the mace a brutish air almost at odds with the philosophical seeker who carried it across the stars.

Despite the immense craftsmanship in its forging, Lorgar's crozius was ostentation utterly without beauty. Entire worlds had been put to the flame by its bearer, while every Chaplain of the Word Bearers Legion wielded its lesser reflection.

None of Lorgar's sons, even those who had spent years from his side, were blind to their father's unease. The primarch cast glances back at the grounded Ultramarines Thunderhawks, waiting for any signs of emergence. Around his poet's smile was the faint suggestion of black stubble, something Argel Tal had never seen before on his meticulous primarch.

Lorgar turned away from his sons, now staring down at the impassive gunships. His whisper carried to the entire Legion.

'Guilliman, brother of my blood, if not my heart. Come to me and answer for your madness.'

In theatrical unity, the gunships' ramps began to lower. The Legion heard their father's last whisper, as the Ultramarines showed themselves at last.

'Bearers of the Word,' he murmured the warning, soft as snakeskin on silk. 'Stand ready, and watch for the first sign of treachery.'

A MERE HUNDRED warriors stood opposed to one hundred thousand. Facing an ocean of grey armour, a single company of Ultramarines had made planetfall with their primarch. Even in the gravity of the moment, Argel Tal wasn't sure whether to be mys-

tified at this display, or insulted by it. He settled for both, his irritation rising all the while.

'The 19th Company,' Xaphen voxed, watching the Ultramarines banner waving in the gentle wind. It depicted a rearing white horse with a mane of fire, over a series of numerals. 'Intriguing.'

Argel Tal watched the white horse rippling in the wind, trying to discern some significance in the 19th's presence. The creature seemed in motion, the flames of its mane real and burning. Aethon Company, the Ultramarines 19th, was well-known to many outside Guilliman's Legion. Aethon himself commanded an entire Imperial Expedition away from his primarch, and was rumoured to be a stern ambassador and a shrewd diplomat. Whatever the truth, the captain was trusted with a great deal more responsibility and independence than most other Astartes could ever claim.

'They are named,' Xaphen said, 'for a fire-breathing horse, in ancient Macraggian mythology. Aethon was the name of a horse that pulled the sun-god's chariot across the sky.'

Argel Tal resisted the urge to shake his head. 'With the greatest respect, brother, I couldn't care less.'

'Knowledge is power,' the Chaplain replied.

'*Focus,*' the captain snapped back. 'You heard the primarch.'

Xaphen sent an acknowledgement chime across the vox – a single static buzz.

The final gunship ramp lowered on steam-venting pistons. Argel Tal remained still, his muscles locked tense, as the Thirteenth Primarch descended with his honour guard, followed by…

'No,' he said, shock stealing his breath.

'Blood of the God-Emperor,' Xaphen whispered.

Ahead of them, Lorgar watched with a viper's smile. 'Malcador the Sigillite.'

Next to the primarch armoured in battleplate of pearl and cerulean walked a slender figure in unassuming, plain robes. Human, utterly frail in Gulliman's massive shadow, the First Lord of Ter-

ra clutched a staff of dark metal and rattling chains, topped by a twin-headed eagle.

Guilliman, by contrast, was hulking where the Sigillite was sparse. His warplate was the blue of Terra's long-burned oceans, an echo from an age of legend, and edged by gold and mother of pearl, glinting in the rising moonlight.

'What insanity is this?' snarled Kor Phaeron, his voice thickened by emotion too rancid to suppress.

'Peace, my friend,' Lorgar murmured, his gaze never leaving the opposing line of warriors. 'The answers we seek will soon be ours. Captains, step forward.'

At the command, one hundred captains advanced, bolters and blades held at ease in gauntlets of grey. One hundred Chaplains, their gold trimmings and crozius mauls marking them out from the ranks, remained a step behind. Behind the warrior-priests, a hundred thousand Word Bearers stood at the ready, holding ranks despite the uneven platform made by the pulverised ground.

Argel Tal tore his glance from Guilliman, the Lord of Macragge's noble features as difficult to look upon as his own father's. His eyes were the hardest part to take in. There was no doubt, no speculation, no curiosity – nothing that told of mortal emotion behind the deep-set eyes. The face could have been sculpted from suntanned stone. Dignity incarnate.

The Seventh Captain repressed a shiver, and turned his attention to the Sigillite. Too human to fear, yet too influential to ignore. The Emperor's right hand and closest confidant.

Here.

Here, and apparently supporting the Ultramarines in their destruction of the perfect city. Argel Tal's hand tightened on the bolter grip.

'Brother,' Lorgar spoke, his tones smooth on the surface, almost entirely hiding the tremble of grief his sons knew must be flowing through him. 'And Malcador. *Welcome to Monarchia.*' At these words, he gestured at the devastation, his handsome features lost to a sickened sneer.

'Lorgar,' Guilliman's voice rumbled like distant thunder, and he said no more than his brother's name.

Argel Tal narrowed his eyes at the absolute neutrality in the tone, not a ghost of emotion. He'd seen automatons in the Legio Cybernetica with more humanity than the Ultramarines primarch.

'Primarch Lorgar,' said Malcador, bowing by way of introduction. 'It grieves us all to meet in these circumstances.'

The golden warrior took a step forward, his crozius resting on his shoulder. 'Does it now? It grieves us all? You do not look grieved, my brother.'

Guilliman said nothing. Lorgar broke his stare after several moments, regarding the Sigillite.

'Answers, Malcador.' He took another step forward, now halfway between his Legion and the hundred Ultramarines. 'I want answers. What happened here? What madness has been allowed to run unchecked?'

The Sigillite pulled back his hood, revealing a face so pale it bordered on grey unhealthiness. 'You cannot guess, Lorgar?' The human shook his head as if in sorrow. 'Truly, this is a surprise to you?'

'Answer me!' the primarch screamed.

The Ultramarines flinched back, several raising weapons in hands that shook with surprise.

Lorgar threw his arms out to the sides, taking in the surrounding devastation a second time, and spit flew from his lips as he roared. *'Answer me for what you have done here! I demand it!'*

'What do we do?' Xaphen voxed. 'What's… what's happening?'

Argel Tal didn't answer. His blade and bolter were suddenly very heavy in his hands, and he stared at the Ultramarines displaying their own shock so openly. While they held ranks, it was clear they were uneasy. And rightly so.

'What have you done to my city?' Lorgar's voice was a hissing whisper, spoken through a false smile.

'It was not compliant,' Malcador's words were slowed by patience. 'This culture, this world, was not comp—'

'Liar! Blasphemer! It was the model of compliance!'

Several Ultramarines retreated a little now, and Argel Tal could see them looking to one another in doubt. A flutter of voices teased the vox-network as the Word Bearers picked up signals from the Ultramarines voxing each other in their unease. Only Guilliman appeared unmoved. Even Malcador was jarred, his eyes wide and his staff gripped tighter as he faced down the primarch's anger.

'Lorgar…'

'They chanted my father's name in the streets!'

'Lorgar, they—'

'They honoured him with each sunrise!' Lorgar came closer, his eyes wild, focused like targeting reticules on his father's advisor. *'Answer me, human. Justify this, when statues of the Emperor adorned every place of gathering!'*

'They worshipped him.' Malcador raised his head, for he was half the height of both primarchs. 'They revered him.' He looked up at Lorgar, seeking some sign of comprehension in the giant's golden face. Seeing none, he drew breath again, and wiped a fleck of the primarch's spittle from his cheek. 'They worshipped him as a god.'

'You plead my case for me?' Lorgar dropped his crozius, letting it fall to the broken ground with a dull thud. He looked at his hands, fingers curled into claws as if he would tear out his own eyes. 'You… you stand in the ruin of perfection, and you say yourself this city was annihilated for nothing? Have you travelled the length of the galaxy to show me you have lost your fragile mortal mind?'

'Lorgar—' the Sigillite tried again, but the rest of his words never left his throat. Malcador fell in silence, smashed aside by Lorgar's backhanded strike. Every warrior nearby heard the wrenching snap of bones breaking, and Malcador crashed onto the rocky ground twenty metres away, tumbling to a halt in the dust.

Face to face with his brother, Lorgar bared his teeth into Guilliman's impassive features.

'Why. Did. You. Do. This.'

'I was ordered to.'

'By this worm?' Lorgar laughed, reaching out a hand towards the fallen figure of Malcador. 'By this maggot?' The Word Bearers' primarch shook his head and stalked back to his own warriors.

'I will take my Legion to Terra, and inform our father of this… this madness, myself.'

'He knows.'

The voice was Malcador's. He rose on unsteady limbs, his words strained and spoken through bleeding lips. Guilliman inclined his head, the barest movement enough to send two of his warriors to aid the Emperor's advisor. Malcador stood, still hunched from the pain, and ordered the approaching Ultramarines away. With his arm outstretched, his staff leapt from the ground a dozen metres away and slapped neatly into his palm.

'What?' Lorgar said, uncertain he'd heard correctly. 'What did you say?'

The wounded First Lord of Terra closed his eyes, using his staff of office as a crutch.

'I said, he knows. Your father knows.'

'You lie.' Lorgar clenched his teeth again, his breath coming fast and shallow. 'You lie, and you are fortunate I do not kill you for this blasphemy.'

Malcador didn't argue. He closed his eyes, raised his head to the sky, and spoke without sound. Every Word Bearer, every Ultramarine, every living being in a ten-kilometre radius heard the man's psychic voice pulsing through their minds, such was its power.

+He will not listen, my lord. Not to me+

Lorgar froze, his hands a hair's breadth from retrieving his crozius on the ground. Guilliman's most expansive movement since arriving was to turn from his golden brother, not in disgust as Argel Tal first thought, but without any expression at all. He was simply shielding his eyes.

Malcador's eyes remained closed, his face angled up to the heavens. To the vessels in orbit.

Lorgar stepped back, voicelessly mouthing 'No, no, no…', as if whispered words could somehow alter fate.

The world around them exploded in light.

THE DISPLACEMENT OF air resulted in a bang not far from a sonic boom, but that wasn't what sent Argel Tal reeling. He'd seen teleportation technology used before – had travelled via such rare means himself – but the noise was filtered to tolerable levels by his helm's perceptive systems.

And it wasn't the light of a teleport flare that forced him to avert his eyes. This, too, would have been compensated for by his armour's internal sensors, dimming his eye lenses immediately.

But he was blind. Blinded by gold, burning like molten metal.

The vox shrieked with thousands of his brothers voicing the same malady, but the reports from his brethren were dull, half-lost in an assault of noise that shouldn't exist. It wasn't a fault with the vox; it was in his head – a crashing of waves loud enough to throw off his balance.

Blind and almost deafened, Argel Tal felt his bolter slip from his grip. It took all his strength to remain standing.

LORGAR AURELIAN SAW none of this.

No blinding golden light. No deafening psychic roar.

He saw six figures standing in unity, five of whom he did not recognise, and one he did. Behind them, the Ultramarines – not afflicted as his warriors were – were on their knees in an orderly display. Only Guilliman and the Sigillite remained standing.

Lorgar looked back to the six. The five ringed the familiar figure, and though the primarch did not know them by name, he knew their creed. Achingly elaborate armour of rich gold. Cloaks of royal scarlet draped from their shoulders. Long halberds topped by weighty silver blades, gripped in hands that would never tremble.

Custodians. The Emperor's guardians.

Lorgar looked to the sixth figure, who was just a man. Despite the vigour of youth, age lines showed time's tracks across features that were both stern and gentle, all at once. The man's appearance depended entirely on which facet of his face one focused upon. He was a tired, ageing man, and a heroic statue immortalised in life's prime. He was a young, grimacing warlord with cold eyes, and a confused elder on the edge of weeping.

Lorgar focused on those eyes now, seeing the warmth of love within the benevolence of trust. The man blinked slowly, and as his eyes opened again, they were cold with the frigid touch of disappointment blending into the ice of disgust.

'Lorgar,' the man said. His voice was quiet but strong, lost in the indecipherable vista between hatred and kindness.

'Father,' Lorgar said to the Emperor of Mankind.

FOUR

A Legion Kneels
If Ultramar Burns
Grey

SIGHT RETURNED, BANISHING the grotesque feeling of helplessness. Such emotion was anathema, prickling at Argel Tal's skin with a thousand insect legs.

He managed to look through his dimmed visor, seeing a towering figure deep in a corona of agonising white light. Around the figure, cloaked and gold-armoured warriors hefted unique spears with practiced ease. Each one was the size of an Astartes, and no Astartes could fail to recognise them.

'Custodes,' he managed to speak through teeth gritted at the light's intensity.

'It's…' Xaphen stammered. 'It's the…'

'I know who it is,' Argel Tal exhaled the words through clenched teeth. And that's when the voice hit him, hit them all, in a wave of invisible force.

+Kneel+ it whispered with the power of a hammer to the forehead. There was no resisting. Muscles acted instantly, no matter that many hearts fought not to obey. Argel Tal was one of them. This was not fealty, nor worship, nor service. This was slavery, and his instincts rebelled at the enforced devotion even as he obeyed it.

One hundred thousand Word Bearers kneeled in the dust of the perfect city, rendered prone by Imperial decree.

A Legion was on its knees.

LORGAR LOOKED OVER his shoulder, taking in the seascape of his kneeling warriors. Fire flickered in his eyes when he returned his gaze to the Emperor.

'Father—' Lorgar began, but the man shook his head.

'Kneel,' he said. His timeless face was framed by dark hair the same colour as Lorgar's facial stubble; like father, like son.

'What?' the primarch asked. He looked past the Emperor to Guilliman, straight-backed and proud. When he returned his gaze to his father, he wiped his eyes with his soft fingertips, as if to clear some lingering phantasm. 'Father?'

'Kneel, Lorgar.'

ARGEL TAL WATCHED with clenched teeth as Lorgar lowered himself to one knee.

His first instincts were fading now, replaced by reason and the comfort of faith. It was only right to kneel before the God-Emperor. He willed his hearts to slow, despite the implied insult of his deity impelling him to abase himself.

The rebellious anger resurfaced in a stinging adrenal flood only a moment later, as he watched the Ultramarines rise to their feet at Guilliman's command. He could see them watching, feel their eyes boring into him as he knelt before them. One Legion's warriors stood in the Emperor's presence with a primarch's blessing, while another was on its knees in the bones of a dead city.

It was a moment that cast a dozen reflections, for the Word Bearers had mirrored this action many times before, under alien skies. Legions laying claim to less discipline or grace might beat their chests and howl at the moon upon achieving compliance, but among the sons of Lorgar, victory was to be cherished in reverence and dignity. The triumphant warriors would kneel in the heart of the fallen city, and heed the words of their Chaplains.

The Rite of Remembrance. A time to recall the sacrifices of lost brothers, and reflect upon one's place in the Word.

Argel Tal felt sweat painting cold trails down his temples and cheeks. Trembling threatened to take hold as his traitorous muscles bunched, locking in painful cramps. The joints of his armour

thrummed with unreleased strength, forcing him to endure this perversion of the Legion's most sacred ritual.

The voice returned. This time, it gave the answers that the XVII Legion so craved.

LORGAR LOOKED INTO his father's unknowable face as the Emperor spoke.

'You are a general, my son. Not a high priest. You were created for war, for conquest, to reunite the human race under the aegis of truth.'

'I—'

'No.' The Emperor closed his eyes, and an image of Monarchia as it had been, bright and glorious, filled Lorgar's mind. 'This is worship,' the Emperor said. 'This is a poison to truth. You speak of me as a god, and forge worlds that suffer under the one lie that has brought humanity to the edge of extinction time and time again.'

'The people are joyous—'

'The people are deceived. The people will burn when their faith is proven false.'

'My worlds are *loyal*.' Lorgar was no longer kneeling. He rose to his feet, his voice rising with him. 'My Legion shapes the most fiercely loyal worlds in your Imperium.'

+It is not my Imperium+

THE WORDS THUDDED into Argel Tal's mind like a stream of bolter shells. For a brief, hateful moment, he glanced at his retinal display to check his life signs. He was certain he was dying, and had he not already been on his knees, he would've fallen to them now.

+It is the Imperium of Man. The empire of humanity, enlightened and saved by the truth+

He heard Lorgar's reply this time.

'I speak no lies. You are a god.'

+Lorgar+

'I will not be silenced because you do not like the melody of one single word. In your grip, a thousand worlds turn! By your will, a million vessels sail the void. You are immortal, undying, seeing all and knowing all that transpires across creation. Father, you are a god in all but name. All that remains is to confess to it.'

+LORGAR+

The voice came with a wall of pressure now, dense and all too tactile. It pounded into Argel Tal like a miasma of engine wash, heating his armour and throwing him to the ground. Around him, he could see his brothers sent sprawling, their armour skidding across the dust.

Defiant in the cyclone of unseen energy, scrolls of scripture ripping from his armour, Lorgar raised his hand to point at his father.

'You are a god. Say the words and end the lie.'

THE EMPEROR SHOOK his head, not in defeat, but calm defiance.

'You are blind, my son. You cling to ancient perceptions, and endanger us all with them. Let this end, Lorgar. Let this end with you heeding my words.'

The psychic wind died with a peal of thunder.

Lorgar stood where he was, trembling for reasons his warriors couldn't discern. Blood ran from one ear, running in a slow trail down his tattooed neck.

'I am listening, father,' he said.

THE SEVENTH CAPTAIN hauled himself back to his feet, stumbling once and righting himself before his armour's stabilisers needed to compensate. He was one of the first Word Bearers to rise. The others still struggled, shivering on hands and knees, or were locked in muscle spasms, their twitching limbs disturbing the dust.

Argel Tal helped Xaphen up, receiving a grunt of thanks.

+Word Bearers, hear me well. You, among all my Legions, are guilty of failure. You number more warriors than any other, ex-

cepting the XIII. Yet your conquests are the slowest, and your victories ring hollow+

It hurt too much to look directly at the figure of white-gold light, haloed by coruscating psychic fire, telling them with words of thunder that all their lives had been wasted.

+You linger on compliant worlds for years after final victory, driving the populace into the worship of false faith, seeding cults of the naive and the deceived, erecting monuments to lies. All you have done in the Great Crusade is for naught. While all others succeed and bring prosperity to the Imperium, you alone have failed me+

Lorgar stepped back from the figure, only now raising his arms to ward off its radiance.

+Wage war as you were created to do. Serve the Imperium as you were born to do. Take with you the lesson learned here this day. You kneel in the ruination found at the end of a false path. Let this be your Legion's rebirth+

The primarch managed a weak 'Father…' but it was spoken to emptiness. Another sonic boom of displacing air heralded the Emperor's return to orbit.

The Ultramarines remained, watching the kneeling, trembling Word Bearers in absolute silence. The Custodians stood alongside Guilliman, while the primarch conferred with their apparent leader, whose helm bore a red crest to match his cloak.

Argel Tal saw Kor Phaeron rising with painful slowness, despite his Terminator armour making the task easier with dense joints of snarling servos. Neither Argel Tal nor Xaphen offered to help. Both of them made for the primarch.

While the Word Bearers struggled to their feet, Lorgar crashed to his knees at last.

The Emperor's golden son stared at the surrounding city as if he recognised none of it, with no idea how he had reached this place. Dead eyes too cold to cry looked out upon his shamed Legion, and the rubble of the lesson they needed to learn.

Argel Tal reached him first. Instinct compelled him to remove his own helm, and he disengaged the seals in his armoured collar, standing unmasked before his primarch.

'Aurelian,' he said.

For the first time, Argel Tal breathed the scorched air of Monarchia, unaltered by merciful filters. It reeked of the oil burned in a thousand years of industry. Xaphen's earlier comment was haunting in its truth: it smelled like they'd lost a war.

He didn't dare touch Lorgar. With his hand outstretched, just short of resting on his primarch's shoulder, he whispered his father's name.

Lorgar turned to regard him, his eyes lacking even a shadow of recognition.

'Aurelian,' Argel Tal said again. He glanced at the staring figures of Guilliman and the Custodians. 'My primarch, come, we must return to our ships.'

For the first time, his hand rested on Lorgar's armoured shoulder, where a scroll of scripture had once hung. Ignoring his touch, Lorgar threw his head back and roared. The captain gripped the primarch's golden pauldron, doing all he could to keep the demigod steady.

Lorgar screamed, deep and low and long, at the uncaring sky. It lasted longer than mortal lungs would allow.

When the anguished cry finally faltered, he ran his bare fingers along the broken ground. With a shaking hand, the primarch smeared black ash across his face, tarnishing his features with the powdered bones of the perfect city.

Xaphen's voice was low and urgent. 'The Ultramarines are bearing witness to this. We must get him to safety.'

Lorgar's mask of ashes was already streaked with tears that cut trails in the dust. The two warriors renewed their grips, trying to bring the golden giant to his feet. For a wonder, instead of the expected slackness in his limbs, Lorgar spat onto the ground and rose with their aid. Both of them felt the trembling in Lorgar's limbs. Neither of them spoke of it.

'Guilliman,' the primarch spoke his brother's name with an envenomed tongue. A shrug of his shoulders pushed Argel Tal and Xaphen aside, immediately forgotten.

Emotion flooded back into Lorgar's eyes. His gaze was locked on Guilliman, who returned it – passionless where Lorgar was inflamed.

'Does it please you,' the Word Bearer lord sneered, 'to witness my shame?'

Guilliman didn't answer, but Lorgar wouldn't back down.

'Does it please you?' he pressed. 'Do you enjoy seeing my efforts reduced to ashes while our father favours you?'

Guilliman breathed slowly, utterly unfazed. He spoke as if no question had been asked.

'Our father entrusted me to inform you of one last matter.'

'Then speak it and begone.' Lorgar reached for his crozius on the ground, and dragged it up from the ash. Dust rained from its spiked head.

'These five warriors of the Legiones Custodes,' the Ultramarines' primarch inclined his head to them. 'They are not alone. Fifteen more remain on my flagship. Our father has ordered them to accompany you, brother.'

Argel Tal closed his eyes at this final indignity. After kneeling in the ashes of failure, after being told by the Emperor that all their achievements were worthless… Now *this.*

Lorgar laughed, the sound ripe with derision. His face was still smeared with dust.

'I refuse. They are not needed.'

'Our father believes otherwise,' Guilliman said. 'These warriors are to be his eyes as your Legion rejoins the Great Crusade.'

'And does our father set hounds to watch over you? Do they reside in your precious empire of Ultramar, whispering of your every move? I see the shadow of a smile on your lips. These others do not know you as I do, brother. Our sons may not see the amusement in your eyes, but I am not blind to such nuance.'

'You have always possessed an active imagination. Today has proven that.'

'My devotion is my strength.' Lorgar clenched his perfect teeth. 'You have no heart, and no soul.' A snort blackened his angelic features with a disgusted twist. 'I pray that one day, you feel as I feel. Would you smile if one of Ultramar's worlds died in fire? Tarentus? Espandor? Calth?'

'You should return to your fleet, brother.' Guilliman uncrossed his arms, revealing the golden aquila emblazoned across his chest. The eagle's spread wings glinted with reflected sunlight. 'You have much work to do.'

The blow came from nowhere. In its wake, the air rang with the echo of metal on metal, the clashing chime of a great cathedral bell. It was almost beautiful.

A primarch lay in the dust, surrounded by his warriors. None present had ever witnessed such a thing. Argel Tal's bolter was raised, aimed at the ranks of Ultramarines who mirrored the gesture in kind. A hundred gun barrels levelled at a hundred thousand. The Seventh Captain needed three attempts to form words.

'Hold your fire,' he whispered into the general vox-channel. 'Do not fire unless fired upon.'

Lorgar rested the immense crozius mace on his golden shoulder. His grey eyes flickered with uncertain emotion as he bared his teeth at the fallen Lord of Macragge.

'You will never mock me again, brother. Is that understood?'

Guilliman's rise was slow, almost hesitant. The golden eagle on his breastplate was split, a valley-crack running through its body.

'You go too far,' a softer voice said. Malcador, First Lord of Terra, still clutched his staff. It was all that kept him standing. 'You go too far.'

'Be silent, worm. The next time you bleed my patience dry, I will do more than slap you aside.'

Guilliman was on his feet now. He turned an expressionless face back to his brother.

'Is your tantrum concluded, Lorgar? I must return to the Crusade.'

'Come, my son,' Kor Phaeron's corpse-sneer was directed at Guilliman even as his words were meant for his primarch. 'Come. We have much to discuss.'

Lorgar exhaled, and nodded once. The anger was fading, and no longer offered a shield against shame. 'Yes. Back to the ships.'

'All companies,' Kor Phaeron spat across the vox, 'return to orbit.'

'Yes, First Captain,' Argel Tal replied with the others. 'By your word.'

ARGEL TAL'S THUNDERHAWK nestled in the shadow cast by a ruined wall. This blasted slice of architecture stood almost alone in the ash desert, the last lingering piece of a building that would never rise again. The captain walked with Xaphen and his subcommanders, Brother-Sergeants Malnor and Torgal. Squads embarked aboard their own gunships, despondent gatherings of warriors walking in near-silence.

'There will be no resettlement,' Torgal said. 'The city is a tomb. There is nothing left to rebuild.'

'It is noted in many historical archives,' said Xaphen, 'that even the most enlightened primitive cultures on pre-Imperial Terra would salt the earth after razing a city to the ground. Nothing would grow for generations. The people of the defeated city had no choice but to leave and begin new lives elsewhere, rather than rebuild.'

'How fascinating,' said Malnor.

'Be quiet,' Torgal grunted. 'Please continue, Chaplain.'

'I am sure none of us are blind to the echoes of those ancient events taking place here. How many orbital bombardments have we prosecuted ourselves? How many times have we battled in the ruins of a sky-blasted city? This was more than simple destruction. This was eradication. The Ultramarines did as they meant to do, and wiped every significant remnant of Khur's culture from the face of the planet. A lesson for us, and a lesson for the people.'

Argel Tal led the group into the Thunderhawk's open cargo bay. Their boots clanged up the ramp.

'I had my bolter aimed at one of the XIII Legion,' he said at last. 'Aimed at his throat.' He tapped the softer fibre bundle cabling in his own armour's flexible layered collar. 'If I'd pulled the trigger, he would be dead.'

'You didn't pull the trigger,' Torgal said. 'None of us did. That's what matters.'

Argel Tal nodded to a squad of Seventh Company as they moved past, and punched the sealant plate, activating the ramps' pistons. The hydraulics compacted, lifting the gangway back up in a slow machine-grind.

'I didn't,' the captain said. 'But I wanted to. After what they did to our city. After they saw us kneel in false shame. I wanted to, and I almost did. I gave the order to hold fire, while silently hoping someone would break it.'

Malnor didn't move. Xaphen said nothing. After several seconds, Torgal offered an unsure 'Sir?'

Argel Tal stared through the diminishing slit of daylight allowed by the rising ramp. Without a word, he thudded a fist onto the control plate, halting the seal. The captain moved to the gang ramp as it made its shuddering descent again.

'Sir?' Torgal tried again.

'I saw something. Movement, in the distance, at the edge of the northern craters.'

His visor zoomed and refocused, panning across the uneven horizon. Nothing. Less than nothing.

'Dust and dead rock,' said Malnor.

'I will return shortly.' Argel Tal was already moving back down the ramp. He didn't reach for the bolter at his hip or the twin blades sheathed on his back.

'Captain,' Xaphen said. 'We were ordered to return to orbit. Is this necessary?'

'Yes. Someone is alive out there.'

THE STRANGER STAGGERED over the broken ground. When her foot caught on a jutting hump of rock, she tumbled forward without a sound, crashing down hard. There she remained, prone in the ash, breathing in arrhythmic wheezes as she sought to summon the strength to stand again.

Judging by the bleeding sores on her palms and knees, it was a performance she'd repeated many times, over many days.

Her scarlet robes were filthy and shredded, though they were clearly of inexpensive weave even before they'd suffered the indignity of neglect. Argel Tal watched her from afar, as the lurching figure made her painful way across the blasted terrain. She seemed to have no specific direction in mind, often turning back on herself, and pausing to crouch and catch her breath after each stumble.

The Astartes moved closer. The stranger's head came up immediately.

'Who's there?' she called.

Argel Tal's helm turned his answer into a machine-growl, with a waspish, sawing edge. 'Who indeed?'

The captain kept his gauntleted hands in full view, palms outward in the Khurian custom of greeting another without hostility. The young woman looked in his direction, but made no eye contact. She stared vaguely off to Argel Tal's side.

'You're one of *them*,' the human recoiled, her feet betraying her on the uneven rock and sending her down to the dust again. She was younger than Argel Tal had first guessed, but the warrior was poor at estimating human age. Eighteen. Perhaps younger. Certainly no older.

'I am Captain Argel Tal of the Seventh Assault Company, Serrated Sun Chapter, Seventeenth Legio Astartes.'

'Seventeenth… You… you are not a false angel?'

'I came to this world six decades ago,' the captain said. 'I was not false then, nor am I now.'

'You are not a false angel,' the girl said again. She was clearly hesitant, still not looking directly at the Astartes as she rose on

shivering legs. Argel Tal took a step closer, offering his hand. The young woman didn't take it. She didn't even acknowledge it.

The warrior's eye lens displays flickered with crude bio-sign analyses that Argel Tal had no need to see. The female's condition was obvious from her jutting facial bones, the patches of raw, discoloured skin decorating her body, and her limbs shaking in a manner that had nothing to do with fear.

'You are on the edge of malnutrition,' said the captain, 'and the wounds on your hands and legs are grievously infected.'

This last was an understatement. Given the spread of flesh corruption below the knees, it was a miracle the girl could still walk at all. Amputation was a very real possibility.

'What colour is your armour, angel?' she asked. 'Answer me this question, I beg you.'

The Word Bearer withdrew his offered hand.

'And you are blind,' the warrior said. 'Forgive me for not noticing before.'

'I saw the city die,' she said. 'I saw it burning as flame rained from the stars. The sky-fire stole my eyes on the Day of Judgement.'

'It's called flash blindness. Your retinas are bleached by an oversaturation of light. Sight may return in time.'

The young woman let out a panicked yell as Argel Tal rested his gauntleted fingers on her skeletal shoulder. She flinched back, but the Astartes kept her standing, not allowing her to fall.

'Please don't kill me.'

'I will not kill you. I am guiding you to safety. We saved this world sixty years ago, Khurian. We never meant to bring this upon you. What is your name?'

'Cyrene. But… what colour is your armour, angel? You never answered me.'

Argel Tal looked down into her blinded eyes.

'Please tell me,' she repeated.

'Grey.'

The girl burst into tears, and allowed herself to be half-carried back to the shelter of the Word Bearers gunship.

FIVE

The Old Ways
The Soul's Fuel
New Eyes

WITH THAT FIERCE breed of arrogance found only in the hearts of the truly ignorant, it was called the Last War.

The Last War – the conflict to end all conflict.

'I remember it,' Kor Phaeron murmured. 'I remember every day and night we fought, while around us, Colchis burned.'

'Six years,' Lorgar's smile was rueful, his eyes cast down to the marble floor of his meditation chamber. 'Six long, long years of civil war. An entire world torn asunder, in the name of faith.'

Kor Phaeron licked his sharpened incisors. The chamber was lit only by candlelight, and the cloying reek of ashy incense was thick in the air.

'But we won,' he said. Seated opposite the primarch, Kor Phaeron wore the grey robe of Colchis's ruling priest caste. Without his Terminator plate, he was as Lorgar had always known him: an ageing man despite physical enhancement surgery, skeletal of form, fierce of eye.

Lorgar wore nothing but a loincloth of coarse weave, leaving his immense but androgynously slender torso bare. Ritual branding marks, shaped like Colchisian runes, bled freely down his back, while older burn-scars had scabbed over with crusty seals. Fresh weals from the lash striped his shoulders – the overlapping wounds forming a cobweb of self-flagellation.

Erebus sat with his primarch and commander on the floor, wearing the black robe of the Legion's Chaplains. It was difficult

to breathe with Lorgar's blood in the air. Such a potent, salty scent was almost dizzying. Primarchs did not receive wounds in war. It was a genetic blasphemy for one to bleed.

'Yes,' Lorgar said, scratching the stubble marking his jawline. 'We won. We won and we spread our faith across our home world.' He moistened his golden lips with a bitten tongue. 'And look where we find ourselves in the wake of that triumph. A century later, we are the lords of nothing, kings of the only Legion ever to fail my father.'

'You always taught us, sire—'

'Speak, Erebus.'

'You always taught us to speak the truth, even if our voices shake.'

Lorgar raised his head, a smile creasing the corners of his split lips as he met the Chaplain's solemn eyes. 'And have we done that?'

There was no hesitation. 'The Emperor is a god,' said Erebus. 'We've taken the truth to the stars, and seeded it across the Imperium. We should feel no shame for how we acted. *You* should feel no shame for it, sire.'

The primarch wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, brushing aside a streak of ash to reveal the gold beneath. Since leaving Khur less than a week before, Lorgar smeared dust from Monarchia's surface over his features with each new day. His kohl-ringed eyes were darkened further by exhaustion and narrowed by the burden of shame, but this single gesture was the closest either warrior had seen to their primarch cleaning himself since his humiliation before the Emperor.

'It all began on Colchis,' he said. 'And we have been in error since then. My visions of the Emperor's arrival. The battles of the Last War. It all began with the belief that divinity deserved worship, purely because it was divine.' He laughed without humour. 'Even now, I ache to think of the faith we destroyed to make room for our beliefs.'

'Sire,' Erebus leaned closer, his eyes rapt upon his primarch's. 'We stand on the precipice of destruction. The Legion… its faith

is shattered. The Chaplains remain stoic, but they are beset by warriors who come to them with doubts. And with you lost to us, with no guiding light, those who carry the crozius have no answers to give those in grey.'

Lorgar blinked, flecks of ash from his eyelashes dusting down to his lap.

'I have no answers to offer the Chaplains,' he said.

'Perhaps that is so,' allowed Erebus, 'but you are still too mired in regret. "Draw inspiration from the past. Use it to shape the future. Do not let it strangle you with shame".'

Lorgar snorted, though there was no malice in the sound. 'You quote my own writings back to me, Erebus?'

'They hold true,' said the Chaplain.

'You dwell on thoughts of Colchis,' Kor Phaeron's eyes glinted with reflected candlelight. To Erebus, he looked desperate on some subtle, secret level. A kind of insatiable, unfeedable, hunger brightened the elder's eyes, eating at him from within. *Most undignified.* 'If there is something you wish to speak of, my son…' Kor Phaeron's thin hand fell upon Lorgar's golden, whip-scarred shoulder, '…then speak of it.'

The primarch looked to his oldest ally, with the cadaverous stare that forever lingered on the man's face. Yet Lorgar saw beyond it, in a way few others ever could, seeing the kindness, the care.

The paternal love for an aggrieved son.

Lorgar smiled with genuine warmth for the first time in three days, and rested his tattooed hand over his foster father's weaker, too-human fingers.

'Do you remember the Emperor's arrival? The exultation in our hearts, that we were proved right? Do you recall the savage vindication after six years of righteous war?'

The older man nodded. 'I do.'

THE YOUNG MAN with the golden skin drops to one knee, silver tears sparkling on his flawless features like droplets of sacred oil.

'I knew you'd come,' he weeps the words. 'I knew you'd come.'

The God in Gold offers his armoured hand to the kneeling young man. 'I am the Emperor,' he smiles, benevolence incarnate, glory radiating from him in a palpable aura that hurts the eyes of every onlooker. Thousands of people line the streets. Hundreds of priests, clad in the dove-grey of the Covenant's ecclesiarchs, kneel with Lorgar before the coming of the God-Emperor.

'I know who you are,' the golden primarch says through his dignified tears. 'I have dreamed of you for years, foreseeing this moment. Father, Emperor, my lord… We are the Covenant of Colchis, and we have won this world through your worship, for the glory of your name.'

LORGAR TURNED TO meet Kor Phaeron's eyes.

'That morning. As I knelt before the Emperor, with the home world's holy caste chanting… With the red rock domes of Vharadesh made amber by the rising dawn. Did you see as I saw?'

Kor Phaeron looked away. 'You will not like the answer, Lorgar.'

'I have liked nothing of late, yet I still wish to know.' He laughed suddenly, softly. 'Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes.'

'I saw a god in golden armour,' Kor Phaeron said. 'The very image of you, but aged in ways I couldn't grasp. I never saw the figure as a benevolent one. His psychic presence pained my eyes, and he smelled of bloodshed, domination, and the many worlds already burned to ash in his wake. Even then, I feared we'd waged six years of war in error, butchering a true faith to replace it with a false one. In his eyes – eyes so like yours – I saw the promise of avarice, the hunger of greed. Everyone else saw nothing but hope. Even you… So I thought, perhaps, I had seen wrong. I trusted your heart, Lorgar. Not my own.'

Lorgar nodded, his contemplative eyes turning away again. Erebus listened in silence, for rare were the moments that any Word Bearer received insight into the primarch's life before the Legion.

'Of all the Emperor's sons,' Kor Phaeron said, 'you are the one that most resembles your father in face and form. But you could

never commit acts of cruelty and destruction while wearing a smile. The others, your brothers, can do this. They take after the Emperor in that way, where you do not.'

Lorgar lowered his gaze.

'Even Magnus?' he asked.

A GIANT STANDS with the Emperor – a figure robed in the azure of off-world oceans. One eye stares down at the kneeling figure. The other eye is lost, a scarred crater marking its lack.

'Greetings, Lorgar,' says the muscled giant. He is taller even than the God in Gold, and his long hair is styled in a scarlet mane, like that of a prideland lion. 'I am Magnus. Your brother.'

'EVEN MAGNUS.' KOR Phaeron seemed reluctant to admit it. His features remained tense. 'Though I respect him greatly, there is a deep cruelty, born of impatience, threaded through his core. I saw it in his face that day, and each meeting since.'

Lorgar looked down at his hands, ash-stained with crescent moons of blood beneath the fingernails.

'We are all our father's sons,' he said.

'You are all facets of the Emperor,' Kor Phaeron amended. 'You are aspects pulled from a genetic primer. The Lion is your father's rationality – his analytical skill – unburdened by conscience. Magnus is his psychic potential and eager mind, unrestrained by patience. Russ is his ferocity, untempered by reason. Even Horus…'

'Go on,' Lorgar said, looking up now. 'What of Horus?'

'The Emperor's ambition, unshaped by humility. Think of all the worlds where our Legion waged war alongside the Luna Wolves. You've seen it as well as I have. Horus hides his arrogance, but it is there – a layer beneath his skin, a shroud around his soul. Pride beats through his body like blood.'

'And Guilliman?' Lorgar let his hands rest on his knees again. A smile inched across his features.

'Guilliman.' Kor Phaeron's narrow lips moulded into a grimace, opposing his primarch's smirk. 'Guilliman is your father's echo,

heart and soul. If all else went wrong, he would be heir to the empire. Horus is the brightest star and you carry your father's face, but Guilliman's heart and soul are cast in the Emperor's image.'

Lorgar nodded, still smiling to see his advisor's bitterness. 'My Macraggian brother is as easy to read as an open book,' he said. 'But what of me, Kor Phaeron? Surely I bear more than my father's features. What aspect of the Imperial avatar have I inherited?'

'Sire?' interrupted Erebus. 'If I may?'

Lorgar granted permission with a tilt of his head. Ever the statesman, Erebus needed no time to compose himself, or his answer.

'You embody the Emperor's hope. You are his belief in a greater way of life, and his desire to raise humanity to achieve its greatest potential. You devote yourself to these ends, forever selfless, utterly faithful, striving for the betterment of all.'

Amusement gleamed in the primarch's eyes – eyes so like the Emperor's own.

'Poetic, but indulgent, Erebus. What of my failings? If I am not proud like Horus Lupercal, nor impatient like Magnus the Red… What will history say of Lorgar Aurelian?'

Erebus's solemn facade cracked. A moment of doubt flashed across his features, and he glanced to Kor Phaeron. The gesture drew a whispered chuckle from their primarch.

'You are both conspirators,' he laughed, the sound soft. 'Do not fear my wrath. I am enjoying this game. It is enlightening. So enlighten me, this last time.'

'Sire,' Kor Phaeron began, but Lorgar silenced him, reaching to touch his foster father's hand as it rested upon his shoulder.

'No. You know better than that, Kor. I am not "sire". Never to you.'

'History will say that if the Seventeenth Primarch had one weakness, it was his faith in others. His selfless devotion and unbreakable loyalty caused him grief beyond the capacity of a mortal heart to contain. He trusted too easily, and too deeply.'

Lorgar said nothing for several moments, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. His shoulders rose and fell with his quiet breaths, the whip-welts inflamed and angry, burning with the faint sheen of sweat dusting his body. Fresher brand marks burnt into the flesh of his back were scabbing over now.

At last, he spoke, his eyes narrowed to slits.

'My father was wrong about me. I am not a general like my brothers. And I refuse that destiny. I will not blindly walk the same paths they already tread. I will never understand tactics and logistics with the effortless ease of Guilliman or the Lion. I will never possess the skill with a blade shown by Fulgrim or the Khan. Am I diminished because I recognise my faults? I do not believe so.'

He looked down at his hands once more. Fine-fingered, barely callused, the hands of an artist or a poet. His mace – the black iron crozius arcanum – was as much a sceptre of office as it was a weapon.

'Is that so wrong?' he asked his closest advisors. 'Is it so wrong of me to walk the ways of a visionary, a seeker, rather than a simple soldier? What is it within my father that renders him so thirsty for blood? Why is destruction the answer to every question he is asked?'

Kor Phaeron clutched Lorgar's shoulder tighter. 'Because, my son, he is gravely flawed. He is an imperfect god.'

The primarch met his foster father's eyes in the chamber's gloom, the glance sharp and cold. 'Do not say what you are about to say.'

'Lorgar…' Kor Phaeron tried, but the primarch's glare silenced him. His eyes were sharp with a plea, not with fury.

'Do not say it,' whispered Lorgar. 'Do not say we tore our home world apart all those years ago in the name of false worship. I cannot live with that. It is one thing for the Emperor to spit on all we have achieved as a Legion, but this is different. Can you piss upon the Covenant and the peaceful Colchis we created after six years of civil war? Will you name my father a false god?'

'Speak the truth,' Erebus cut in, 'even if your voice shakes.'

Lorgar lowered his ash-streaked face into his filthy hands. In that moment, Erebus and Kor Phaeron locked eyes. The latter nodded to the former, and the First Captain spoke again.

'You know it is true, Lorgar. I would never lie to you. This is something we must all face. We *must* atone for this sin.'

'The Chaplains stand with you, sire.' Erebus added his voice to Kor Phaeron's. 'The heart of every warrior-priest in the Legion beats in rhythm with yours. We stand ready to act upon your word.'

Lorgar shrugged off their platitudes, as well as his foster father's reassuring hand. The movement split the healing scabs on his shoulder blades, birthing trickle-rivers of dark blood weeping down his golden back.

'You are calling my entire life a lie.'

'I am saying we were *wrong*, my son. That's all.' Kor Phaeron dipped his gnarled hand into the bowl of ash by Lorgar's side. Monarchia's dust spilled through his curled fingers, stinking of charred rock and failure. 'We prayed to the wrong god for the right reasons, and Monarchia paid the price for our mistake. But it is never too late to atone. We purged our home world of the Old Faith, and now you fear as we all fear: Colchis prospered under the old ways and its legends, until we ravaged it in the name of a lie.'

'This is heresy,' Lorgar trembled, barely containing his emotion.

'It is atonement, my son.' Kor Phaeron shook his head. 'We've been wrong for so long. We must purge the root of our errors. The source lies on Colchis.'

'Enough.' The ash on Lorgar's cheeks was split by trailing tears. 'Both of you… Leave me.'

Erebus rose to obey, but Kor Phaeron rested his hand on the primarch's shoulder once more. 'I am disappointed in you, boy. To be so proud that you cannot face up to failure and make amends.'

Lorgar clenched his perfect teeth, saliva glistening on his lips. 'You want to return to Colchis, the cradle of our Legion, and *apologise* for two million deaths, six years of war, and devoting an

entire world to worshipping an unworthy god for almost a century?'

'Yes,' Kor Phaeron said, 'because it is the mark of greatness to deal with one's mistakes. We will reforge Colchis, as well as every world we have conquered since we first left our home world to join the Great Crusade.'

'And every world we take in the future,' said Erebus, 'must follow a new faith, rather than worship the Emperor.'

'There is no new faith! You both preach madness. Do you think my Legion kneeling in the dust shames me? Monachia was nothing compared to the rape of my own home world over a lie?'

'The truth cares nothing for what we wish, sire,' said Erebus. 'The truth simply is.'

'You studied the Old Faith,' Kor Phaeron said. 'You believed it yourself as a young seeker, before your visions of the Emperor's arrival. You know the way to uncover whether it was a false faith, or a pure one.'

Lorgar wiped drying silver tears from his face. 'You want us to chase a myth across the stars.' His eyes flicked between them both, bright and focused. 'Let us speak plainly now, more than ever before. You want us to embark on a fool's odyssey through the galaxy, in search of the very gods we've spent decades denying.'

Lorgar laughed, the sound rich with disgust. 'I am right, aren't I? You want us to undertake the Pilgrimage.'

'We are nothing without faith, sire,' said Erebus.

'Humanity,' Kor Phaeron pressed his palms together in prayer, 'must have faith. Nothing unites mankind the way religion inspires unity. No conflict rages as fiercely as a holy war. No warrior kills with the conviction of a crusader. Nothing in life breeds bonds and ambitions greater than the ties and dreams forged by faith. Religion brings hope, unification, law and purpose. The foundations of civilisation itself. Faith is nothing less than the pillar of a sentient species, raising it above the beast, the automaton, and the alien.'

Erebus drew his gladius in a smooth motion, reversing the grip and offering the sword to Lorgar.

'Sire, if you have truly abandoned your beliefs, then take this blade and end my life now. If you believe there is no truth in the old ways – if you believe mankind will prosper without faith, then carve the two hearts from my chest. I have no wish to live if every principle guiding our Legion lies broken at your feet.'

Lorgar took the blade in a trembling hand. Turning it this way and that, he stared at his candlelit reflection – a visage of gold in the silver steel.

'Erebus,' he said. 'My wisest, noblest son. My faith is wounded, but my beliefs remain. Rise from your knees. All is well.'

The Chaplain obeyed, stoic as ever, resuming his position across from Lorgar.

'Mankind needs faith,' said the primarch. 'But faith must be true, or it will lead to devastation – as our brothers in the Thirteenth Legion have so viciously proved. And… and as we learned ourselves in six years of unconscionable war before the Emperor came to Colchis. It is time we learned from our mistakes. It is time *I* learned from *my* mistakes.'

'There is one other to whom you can turn,' Kor Phaeron pressed on, supporting his primarch's rising resolution, 'a brother with whom you debated the nature of the universe. You have often spoken of those nights – discussing philosophy and faith in the Emperor's own palace. You know of whom I speak.'

Erebus nodded at the first captain's words. 'He may hold the key to proof, sire. If the Old Faith has a core of fact at its heart, he may know where to begin the journey.'

'Magnus,' Lorgar said the name in contemplative softness. It made sense. His brother, whose psychic strength and fierce intelligence put all other minds to shame. They'd spoken often in the Hall of Leng – that cold, regal chamber on distant Terra – arguing with smiles and scrolls over the nature of the universe.

'It will be done. I will meet with Magnus.'

Kor Phaeron smiled at last. Erebus bowed his head, as Lorgar continued.

'And if our suspicions prove correct, we will undertake the Pilgrimage. We must know if our Colchisian forefathers spoke the truth when they founded their faith. But we must also move with caution. The Emperor's hounds prowl around our pack, and as wise as my father is, he has shown his blindness to the underlying truths of the universe.'

Kor Phaeron now bowed as well, mirroring Erebus. 'Lorgar. My son. This will be our atonement. We can enlighten humanity with this truth, and wash away the stains of the past. In truth… I have feared this moment for some time.'

Lorgar licked his cracked lips. They tasted of ash. 'If that is so, why have you waited to share your worries? Hindsight is a powerful vindicator, my friend, but none of us saw this coming. Not you, not I.'

Kor Phaeron's eyes fairly gleamed. The elder leaned forward, as if the scent of some triumphant hunt filled his senses.

'I have something I must confess, great lord,' he said. 'A truth that must grace your ears now, for the time has come.'

Lorgar turned to his foster father with threatening slowness. 'I do not like your tone,' he said.

'Sire, my primarch, I tell no lie when I say I have feared this day would come. I took the smallest, most humble measures against its arrival, and—'

The words died in his throat, trapped there by his master's hand. Lorgar squeezed the older man's thin, tiny neck, cutting off speech and air with the barest use of strength. Erebus tensed, his eyes moving between the two figures.

Lorgar pulled Kor Phaeron closer, breathing deeply as if to mock the elder's strangled gasps.

'No more revelations, Kor Phaeron. Have we not confessed to enough of our own flaws this night?'

He loosened his grip enough for Kor Phaeron to rasp out the words.

'Davin, seventeen years ago,' the elder whispered. 'Corossa, twenty-nine years ago. Uvander, eight years ago…'

'*Compliant worlds,*' Lorgar hissed into his foster father's face. 'Worlds where you yourself remained behind to begin their education in the Imperial Truth.'

'Compliant… with the Imperial Truth. But embers of… cultures… were allowed to… remain.'

'*What. Embers.*' Lorgar growled.

'Beliefs… that matched… the Old Faith… of home… I could not let… potential… truths… die…'

'Can I not control my own warriors?' Lorgar took a shuddering breath, and something clicked quietly inside Kor Phaeron's neck. 'Am I my brother Curze, struggling to control a Legion of liars and deceivers?'

'Lord, I… I…' Kor Phaeron's eyes were rolling back into his skull. His tongue was dark now, slapping against his thin lips.

'Sire,' Erebus began. 'Sire, you'll kill him.'

Lorgar stared at Erebus for several moments, and the Chaplain wasn't sure his liege lord even recognised him.

'Yes,' Lorgar said at last. 'Yes. I could.' He opened his fingers, letting Kor Phaeron collapse to the chamber floor in a heap of robed limbs. 'But I will not.'

'My lord…' the elder heaved in air through blue lips. 'Much to be learned… from those cultures… They are all echoes of ancestral human faith… Like you… I am no butcher… I wished to save… the lore of the species…'

'It is a time of many revelations,' the primarch sighed. 'And I am not blind to why you did this, Kor Phaeron. Would that I had showed the same forethought and mercy.'

It was Erebus who replied. 'You have asked the question yourself, sire. What if there is truth in the cultures we destroy? Kor Phaeron saved a handful, but the Great Crusade has annihilated thousands. What if we are repeating the sin of Colchis over and over and over again?'

'And why,' Kor Phaeron managed a faint smile as he touched his discoloured throat, 'do so many cultures share the same beliefs as our own home world? Surely that suggests an underlying truth…'

The Seventeenth Primarch nodded, the motion slow and sincere. Already, even before this latest confession, his mind was turning to the future, tuning in to the endless possibilities. This was his genetic gift in action: a thinker, a dreamer, where his brothers were warriors and slayers.

'We have worshipped at the wrong altar for over a hundred years,' said Kor Phaeron, his voice returning.

Lorgar sifted through the bowl of ash, clutching another handful and smearing it across his face.

'Yes,' he said, with strength returning to his voice. 'We have. Erebus?'

'At your command, sire.'

'Take my words to the Chaplains, tell them all of what transpires in the days I remain sequestered here. They deserve to know their primarch's heart. And when you return for further counsel tomorrow, please bring me parchment and a pen. I have much to write. It will take days. Weeks. But it must be written, and I will not leave my isolation until it is done. You, both of you, will help me compose this great work.'

'What work, sire?'

Lorgar smiled, and never had he looked so much like his father.

'The new Word.'

SIX

Kale the Servitor
Unfocused
Warrior-Priest

THE GIRL FOUND it difficult to sleep, with no grasp of where day ended and night began. There was never a cessation of sound; the room forever rumbled, even if only faintly, with tremors from the distant engines. With darkness and sound both constant, she wiled away the hours sitting upon her bed, doing nothing, staring at nothing, hearing nothing except for the occasional voice pass her door.

Blindness brought a hundred perceptive difficulties, but foremost among them was boredom. Cyrene had been a prolific reader and her job necessitated a fair amount of travel, seeing all of the public sights in the city. With her eyes ruined, both those paths were barred in any meaningful sense.

In her darker moments, she wondered at destiny's cruel sense of humour. To be chosen by the Astartes, to dwell among the angels of the Emperor… To walk the hallways of their great iron warship, smelling the sweat and machine oil… but seeing nothing at all.

Oh, yes. Hilarious.

Her first hours aboard had been the hardest, but at least they'd been eventful. During a physical examination in a painfully cold chamber, with needles sticking into the wasted muscles of her legs and arms, Cyrene had listened to one of the angels explain about bleached retinal pigment, and how malnutrition affected the organs and muscles. She'd tried to focus on the angel's

words, but her mind wandered as she sought to embrace what had happened, and where she now found herself.

The last two months on the surface had not been kind to her. The wandering groups of bandits in the foothills around the city had no regard for the sacred *shuhl* robe, or its traditions of respect.

'Our world has ended,' one of them had laughed. 'The old ways no longer matter.'

Cyrene had never seen him, but when she slept, her mind conjured faces he might have worn. Cruel, mocking faces.

During her medical examination, she couldn't stop shivering, no matter how she tensed her muscles to resist. The angels' solar-sailing vessel was cold enough to make her teeth clatter together when she tried to shape words, and she wondered if her breath was misting as it left her lips.

'Do you understand?' the angel had asked.

'Yes,' she lied. 'Yes, I understand.' And then, 'Thank you, angel.'

Soon, other humans came to assist her. They smelled of spicy incense and spoke in careful, serious voices.

They walked for some time. It could have been five minutes or thirty – without her eyes, everything felt stretched and slow. The corridors sounded busy. Occasionally she'd hear the machine-snarls of an angel's armour joints as the warrior walked past. Much more frequently, she heard the swish of robes.

'Who are you?' she asked as they travelled.

'Servants,' one man replied.

'We serve the Bearers of the Word,' said the other.

On they walked. Time passed, the seconds marked by footsteps, the minutes by voices passing by.

'This is your chamber,' one of her guides said, and proceeded to walk her around a room, placing her shaking fingers on the bed, the walls, the door release controls. A patient tour of her new home. Her new cell.

'Thank you,' she said. The room was not large, and only scarcely furnished. She was far from comfortable, but Cyrene wasn't

worried about being left alone here. It would be a blessing of sorts.

'Be well,' the two men said in unison.

'What are your names?' she asked.

The reply she received was the hiss-thud of the automatic door sealing closed.

Cyrene sat on the bed – it was a hard, thin mattress not far removed from a prisoner's cot – and commenced her long, sensory-deprived existence of doing absolutely nothing.

The only break in her daily monotonies came from a servitor, who was remarkably reluctant (or unable) to speak in any detail, bringing her three meals of gruel-like, chemical paste a day.

'This is disgusting,' she remarked once, summoning up a frail smile. 'Am I to assume it consists of many nutrients and other beneficial things?'

'Yes,' was the dead-voiced reply.

'Do you eat it yourself?'

'Yes.'

'I am sorry to hear that.'

Silence.

'You don't speak much.'

'No.'

'What is your name?' Cyrene tried at last.

Silence.

'Who were you?' she asked. Cyrene was inured to servitors; the Imperium had left behind the secrets of their construction sixty years before, and they were commonplace in Monarchia. *Penance* was the term used for the fate suffered by heretics and criminals. Either way, it amounted to the same. The sinner's mind was scrubbed of all vitality, and bionics were installed within the body to increase its strength or enhance its utility.

Silence met her question.

'Before you were made into this,' she tried to make her smile more friendly. 'Who were you?'

'No.'

'No, you don't recall, or no, you won't tell me?'

'No.'

Cyrene sighed. 'Fine. Go, then. See you tomorrow.'

'Yes,' it replied. Feet shuffled. The door hissed closed again.

'I shall name you Kale,' she said to the empty room.

XAPHEN HAD VISITED her twice since the first day, and Argel Tal had come three times. Each meeting with the captain had played out much the same as the one preceding it: with stilted conversation and awkward silences. From what Cyrene gathered, the Legion's fleet was en route to a world they were supposed to conquer, but were denied the order to begin the assault.

'Why?' she'd asked, glad to have even this uncomfortable company.

'Aurelian remains in seclusion,' Argel Tal had said.

'Aurelian?'

'A name for our primarch, spoken by few outside the Legion. It is Colchisian, the language of our home world.'

'It's strange,' Cyrene confessed, 'to have a nickname for a god.'

Argel Tal fell silent for some time. 'A primarch is not a god. Sometimes the sons of gods, despite the power they inherit, are demigods. And it is not a "nickname". It is a term of kinship, used only among family. It translates loosely as "the gold".

'You said he remains secluded.'

'Yes. Within his chambers on our flagship, *Fidelitas Lex*.'

'Does he hide from you?'

She heard the Astartes swallow. 'I am not entirely comfortable with this line of discussion, Cyrene. Let us just say that he has much to contemplate. The God-Emperor's judgement is a burden upon many souls. The primarch suffers as we suffer.'

Cyrene thought long and hard before what she said next. 'Argel Tal?'

'Yes, Cyrene.'

'You do not sound upset. You don't sound as if you're suffering.'

'Do I not?'

'No. You sound angry.'

'I see.'

'Are you angry at the Emperor for what he did to you?'

'I have to go,' said Argel Tal. 'I am summoned.' The Astartes rose to his feet.

'I heard no summons,' the young woman said. 'I'm sorry if I offended you.'

Argel Tal walked from the room without another word. It would be four days before she had company again.

ARGEL TAL REGARDED the headless body with momentary consternation. He hadn't meant to do that.

Decapitated, the servitor toppled to its side and lay on the floor of the iron cage, shivering in fitful spasm. The captain ignored its lifeless twitching, instead focusing on the slack-mouthed head that had flown between the iron cage's bars and thudded against the wall of the practice chamber. It watched him now, its dead eyes trembling, its augmented maw open – tongueless, with a jawbone of bronze plating.

'Was that necessary?' Torgal asked. The sergeant was stripped to the waist, his muscled torso a geography of swollen, layered muscles, formed by the biological tectonics at work in his genetic code. The fused ribcage robbed him of much of his humanity, as did the lumpen physicality of his musculature. If there was anything that could be considered handsome in the laboratory-wrought physiques of the Astartes subspecies, it was lacking in Torgal. Scars decorated much of his dark flesh: ritual brandings, tattooed Colchisian scripture, and the slitted valleys from carving blades that found their marks over the years.

Argel Tal lowered the practice gladius. The smeared redness along its length reflected the overhead lighting in wet flashes.

'I am unfocused,' he said.

'I noticed, sir. So did the training servitor.'

'Two weeks now. Two weeks of sitting in orbit, doing nothing. Two weeks of Aurelian remaining in isolation. I was not made to deal with this, brother.'

Argel Tal hit the release pad, opening the training cage's hemispheres and stepping from its boundaries. With a grunt, he cast his bloodied sword to the ground. It skidded, rasping along the floor and coming to a rest by the dead slave.

'It was my turn next,' Torgal muttered, looking down at the slain slave with its six bionic arms. Each one ended in a blade. None bore traces of blood.

Argel Tal wiped sweat from the back of his neck, and tossed the towel onto a nearby bench. He was only half-paying attention to the maintenance servitors dragging the slain slave away for incineration.

'I spoke with Cyrene,' he said, 'several days ago.'

'So I heard. I've been thinking of meeting with her myself. You don't find her a calming influence?'

'She sees too much,' said Argel Tal.

'How ironic.'

'I'm serious,' the captain said. 'She asked if I was angry with the Emperor. How am I supposed to answer that?'

Torgal's glance took in the rest of Seventh Company's practice chamber. The battle-brothers training elsewhere knew well enough to give their leader a respectful space when his humours were unbalanced. Wooden staves clacked against each other; fist fighting spars played out to the sound of meaty thumps; powered force cages muted the sounds of clashing blades within. He turned back to the captain.

'You could answer it with the truth.'

Argel Tal shook his head. 'The truth feels foul on the tongue. I won't speak it.'

'Others will speak it, brother.'

'Others? Like you?'

Torgal shrugged a bare shoulder. 'I am not ashamed to be angry, Argel Tal. We were wronged, and we've been walking the wrong path.'

Argel Tal stretched, working out the stiffness in his shoulder muscles. He took a moment to compose his reply. Torgal was a loudmouth, and he knew whatever he said would be carried to

the rest of the company, perhaps even across to the rest of the Serrated Sun.

'There's more to this than whether the Emperor wronged us or not. We are a Legion founded on faith, and we find ourselves faithless. Anger is natural, but it is no answer. I will wait for the primarch to return to us, and I will hear his wisdom before I decide my path.'

Torgal couldn't help but smile. 'Listen to yourself. Are you sure you don't want to carry a crozius? I'm sure Erebus would consider training you again. I've heard him express his regret to Xaphen more than once.'

'You are an insidious presence in my life, brother.' The captain's scowl darkened his otherwise handsome features. His eyes were the blue of Colchisian summer skies, and his face – unscarred like so many of his brethren – still showed echoes of the human he might have been.

'That ship sailed a long time ago,' the captain said. 'I made my choice, and the First Chaplain made his.'

'But—'

'Enough, Torgal. Old wounds can still ache. Has there been word of the primarch's return?'

Torgal regarded Argel Tal closely, as if seeking something hidden in his eyes. 'Not that I'm aware of. Why do you ask?'

'You know why. You've not heard anything from the Chaplain gatherings?'

Torgal shook his head. 'They're bound by oaths of secrecy that a few innocent questions won't break. Have you spoken with Xaphen?'

'Many times, and he reveals little. Erebus has the primarch's ear, and delivers Aurelian's words down to the warrior-priests at their conclaves. Xaphen promises we'll be enlightened soon. The primarch's seclusion will be a matter of weeks, not months.'

'Do you believe that?' Torgal asked.

Argel Tal laughed, the sound bitter and short. 'Knowing what to believe is the greatest threat we face.'

CYRENE WAS ASLEEP the next time she received a worthwhile visitor. The sound of her door sliding open roused her to a layer of rest slightly above unconsciousness.

'Go away, Kale. I'm not hungry.' She rolled over and covered her head with the ungenerous pillow. Evidently the monkish, scarce comforts of the Legion's warriors extended to their servants, as well.

'Kale?' asked a deep, resonant voice.

Cyrene removed the pillow. Coppery saliva tingled under her tongue, and her heart beat a touch faster.

'Hello?' she called.

'Who is Kale?' the voice asked.

Cyrene sat up, her blind eyes flicking left and right in futile instinct. 'Kale is the servitor that brings me my meals.'

'You named your servitor?'

'It was the name of a meat vendor in the Tophet Plaza. He was lynched for selling dog meat instead of lamb, and sentenced to penance for his deceit.'

'I see. Appropriate, then.'

The stranger moved around the cell with the light whisper of robes. Cyrene could feel the change in the air – the newcomer was a hulking figure, imposing beyond her blindness.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'I thought you would recognise my voice. It is Xaphen.'

'Oh. Angels sound very similar to me. All of your voices are so low. Hello, Chaplain.'

'Hello again, *shuhl-asha*.'

She kept the wince from her face. Even the respectful term for her trade shamed her, when spoken in an angel's voice. 'Where is Argel Tal?'

Xaphen growled, like a desert jackal at bay. It took a few seconds for Cyrene to realise it was a chuckle.

'The captain is attending a gathering of Legion commanders.'

'Why are you not with him?'

'Because I am not a commander, and I had my own duties to attend to. A conclave of the Chaplain brotherhood, aboard the *Inviolate Sanctity*.'

'Argel Tal told me of those.'

Xaphen's smile infected his tone, rendering the words almost kindly. 'Did he? And what did he tell you?'

'That the primarch speaks to one named Erebus, and Erebus carries the lord's words to the warrior-priests.'

'True enough, *shuhl-asha.* I was told your vision is still not showing signs of return. The adepts are considering augmetic replacements.'

'Replacing my eyes?' She felt her skin crawl. 'I… I wish to wait, to see if they heal.'

'It is your choice. Augmetics of delicate organs are specialised and rare. If you wish to have them, there would be a wait of several weeks before they were ready for implantation.'

The angel's clinical tone was curiously unnerving. He delivered his blunt, kindly sentences with all the care of a hammer to the head.

'Why are they considering it?' Cyrene asked.

'Because Argel Tal asked it of them. The Apothecarion on board *De Profundis* has the resources necessary for human augmentation, when it comes to valued mortal crew.'

'But I am of no value.' She didn't speak from self-pity, merely gave voice to her confusion. 'I do not know how I could ever serve the Legion.'

'No?' Xaphen said nothing for a several moments. Perhaps he looked around the featureless chamber. His voice was gentler when it returned. 'Forgive my laxity in visiting you, *shuhl-asha*. The last days have been difficult. Allow me to cast some light on your situation.'

'Am I a slave?'

'What? No.'

'Am I a servant?'

The angel chuckled. 'Let me finish.'

'Forgive me, Chaplain.'

'Several other Chapters encountered lost souls in Monarchia's graveyard. You were not the only Khurian to join the Legion when we left, but you were the only one taken in by the Chapter of the Serrated Sun. You ask how you could serve us. I would argue that you already do. Argel Tal is my brother, and I know the paths his thoughts take. He brought you as a reminder, a symbol of the past. You are the living memorial of our Legion's greatest failure.'

'The perfect city was no den of sin.' She tried to keep the offence from her voice. 'Why do you always speak of it so?'

A pause. The slow release of a deep breath. 'The city itself was not the sin. It was what the city represented. I have told you what the God-Emperor decreed that day. You have a keen mind, girl. Do not ask for answers you can shape yourself. Now, this desire to serve the Legion: tell me why it matters to you.'

She'd not really considered it before. It seemed the only course to walk, given her presence here. Yet there was a deeper reason, a desire that pulled at her in the uncountable hours she sat in silence.

'I owe my life to the Legion,' she said, 'and I wish to serve because it feels right that I should. It would be fair.'

'Is that all?'

She shook his head, with no idea if Xaphen was even looking at her. 'No. I confess I am also lonely, and very bored.'

Xaphen chuckled again. 'Then we will deal with that. Were you one of the faithful on Khur?'

Cyrene hesitated, and moistened dry lips with a nervous tongue. 'I listened to the Speakers of the Word preaching in the plazas, and the daily prayers echoing across the city. Nothing stirred my heart. I believed, and I knew the scriptures, but I did not…'

'Care.'

Cyrene nodded. Her throat gave a sticky click as she took a breath. 'Yes,' she admitted. She couldn't help the twitch when Xaphen's hand rested heavy on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' the young woman said, 'for my lack of faith.'

'Don't be. You were right, Cyrene.'

'I… what?'

'You showed insight, and the strength to doubt conventional belief. Over countless centuries, humanity has achieved great things in the name of faith. History teaches us this. Faith is the fuel for the soul's journey. Without belief in greater ideals, we are incomplete – the union of the spirit with the flesh is what raises us above beasts and inhumans. But misplaced worship? To bow down before an unworthy idol? This is a sin of the gravest ignorance. And that is a sin you've never been guilty of. Be proud of that, lady.'

Warmth flooded through her, to earn the respect of an angel like this. Fervour filled her voice for the first time since the death of her city.

'How could anyone bow before an unworthy idol?'

Another pause. A hesitation, before sighing out the words. 'Perhaps they were deceived. Perhaps they saw divinity and believed it was worthy of worship purely because it was divine.'

'I don't understand.' Her eyebrows met in confusion above unseeing eyes. 'There's nothing else to worship but the divine. There are no gods but the Emperor.'

She heard Xaphen take a breath. When the Chaplain spoke again, his voice was softer still.

'Are you so certain, Cyrene?'

SEVEN

Compliance
Swords of Red Iron
Carthage

THE WORLD HAD two names, only one of which mattered. The first was used by the native population – a name that would soon be lost in history's pages. The second was the name imposed by its conquerors, which would hold for centuries, branding an Imperial identity upon a dead planet.

The globe span in the void with an orbit of slow grace comparable to distant Terra, and its blue-green surface marked it as a younger sibling of that most venerated world. Where Terra's seas were burned dry from centuries of war and tectonic upheaval, the oceans of Forty-Seven Sixteen were rich with salt-surviving life, and deep beyond poetic imagining. Perhaps the future would bring a need for this world to be a bastion-metropolis akin to Terra, where the buried earth choked beneath palaces and castles and dense hive towers. For now, its landmasses wore the green and brown of unspoiled wilderness, the white and grey of mountain ranges. Cities of crystal and silver, spires that speared the sky from almost laughably fragile foundations, dotted the continents. Each city was linked by well-worn trade roads – freight veins with traffic for blood.

This was Forty-Seven Sixteen, the sixteenth world ready to be brought to compliance by the 47th Expedition.

Four weeks after the Word Bearers fleet sailed from the ruin of Khur, they translated in-system here, prowling around Forty-

Seven Sixteen with the predatory promise of ancient seaborne raiders.

The grey warships remained in orbit for eight hours, engines dead, doing nothing at all.

At the ninth hour, cheers echoed throughout every vessel in the fleet. The primarch appeared on the command deck of *Fidelitas Lex*, flanked by Erebus and Kor Phaeron. Both Astartes wore their battle armour – the former in the grey of the Legion, the latter in his brutal warplate of the Terminator elite.

A live pict-feed carried the image to the bridge of every warship bearing Legion colours, as thousands upon thousands of warriors watched their primarch return.

Clad in sleek armour of granite grey, somehow all the more regal for the lack of ostentation, Lorgar's crooked smile spoke of some hidden amusement he ached to share with his sons.

'I hope you will all forgive my absence,' the words melted into a chuckle. 'And I trust you have enjoyed this time of contemplation and respite.'

Around him, Astartes warriors broke into laughter. Kor Phaeron lowered his hollow eyes, giving a bleak smirk. Even Erebus smiled.

'My sons, the past is the past and we look now to the future.' In Lorgar's grey fist was his crozius mace. He carried it over his shoulder with casual ease. 'Those of you assigned to other expedition fleets will be granted leave to return to them shortly, but first, we will renew our bonds of brotherhood as a united Legion.'

Another cheer rang out across the decks of over a hundred of ships.

'This is Forty-Seven Sixteen,' Lorgar's contemplative smile remained, though melancholy robbed it of some conviction. 'A world of such great beauty.'

With his free hand, he smoothed his fingertips around his short brown beard, little more than neat stubble along his jawline. 'I do not believe the people of this world to be irrevocably corrupt, but as we have seen, my judgement has its critics.'

More laughter. Kor Phaeron and Erebus met each other's eyes, their chuckles joining the Legion's. This levity was nothing less than an exorcism – a shedding of humiliation's clinging stink – and both warriors sensed it clearly.

'You have all seen the briefing details,' said the primarch. 'The First Chaplain and First Captain inform me that the Chapter leaders gathered this morning to discuss objectives and landing zones, so I will not waste your precious time.' His dry smile bore little humour now, yet still it remained. 'The Emperor wishes the XVII Legion to conquer with greater alacrity. If a world cannot be brought to compliance with haste, then it must be purged to its core. So we come to this.'

In unison, Erebus drew his crozius and lightning rippled in a jagged flow down the claws of Kor Phaeron's gauntlets.

'My sons.' Their master's smile died fast enough for many to doubt it had ever been there. 'Forgive me for the words duty forces me to speak.'

Lorgar raised his maul of black iron, aiming it at the planet slowly spinning on the occulus viewscreen. Storms formed in a crawling, meteorological ballet as the Legion stood witness – the fleet's low orbit was curdling the planet's skies.

'Word Bearers,' said the primarch. 'Kill every man, woman and child on that heretic world.'

CYRENE WAITED UNTIL she realised Argel Tal wasn't going to continue. Only then did she speak.

'And did you?' she asked. 'Did you do it?'

'You didn't feel the ship quake as it opened fire?' The captain moved around the room. Cyrene wondered if he were pacing, or simply looking at what few personal effects she possessed. 'I find it difficult to believe you slumbered through twelve hours of orbital barrage.'

Cyrene hadn't slept at all. When the sirens wailed and the room shook two days before, she'd known what was beginning. The Word Bearers' warships commenced their invasion with a full day of cannon-fire. At times, when myriad mechanical processes

aligned just right, the main batteries hurled their incendiary payloads at the planet below in a united burst. The thunder rang in her ears for half a minute afterwards, and they were the worst moments: blinded and deafened, completely without senses. Anyone could enter her room, and she'd be none the wiser. Cyrene had lain on her uncomfortable bed in thrall to her imagination, praying not to feel unknown fingers on her face.

'That's not what I meant,' she said. 'Did you go to the surface after the sky-fire had ended?'

'Yes. We landed in view of the only city that remained standing. It had to be destroyed from the ground. Our orbital weapons couldn't pierce its defensive shield.'

'You… killed an entire world in one day?'

'We are the Legio Astartes, Cyrene. We did our duty.'

'How many died?'

Argel Tal had seen the augury estimates. They put the number at almost two hundred million souls sacrificed that day.

'All of them,' said the captain. 'A world's worth of human life.'

'I don't understand,' she said, closing her useless eyes. 'All those people. Why did they have to die?'

'Some cultures cannot be re-educated, Cyrene. When a civilisation is founded upon poisoned principles, redemption is a forlorn hope. Better that they burn, than live in blasphemy.'

'But *why* did they have to die? What sins had they committed?'

'Because the Emperor willed it. Nothing else matters. These people spat upon our offers of peace, laughed at our desire to integrate them into the Imperium, and openly displayed the gravest sin of ignorance, forging populations of artificial constructs. The breeding of false life in imitation of the human form is an abomination unto our species, and cannot be ignored.'

'But why?' she said. The words were almost her mantra these days.

Argel Tal sighed. 'Are you aware of the old proverb: "Judge a man by his questions, not by his answers"?'

'I know it. We said something similar on Khur.'

'It is used across the galaxy, in one form or another. That was the Terran expression. But there is a Colchisian equivalent: "Blessed is the mind too small for doubt".'

'But *why?*' the young woman repeated.

Argel Tal bit back a second sigh. It was difficult – the girl was immensely naive and Argel Tal knew he was no teacher – but enlightenment had to come from somewhere. There was no honour in making a secret of the truth.

'The answer is in the stars themselves, Cyrene. We are a young species, spread thin across thousands of worlds. The space between the stars holds many threats: xenos creatures of countless breeds, evolved for predation. Those that do not immediately fall upon humanity to feed or destroy tend to be dangerous for other reasons. These ancient civilisations are in decline, either because they were too weak to stabilise after their growth, or because their own hubristic, deviant technologies doomed them. There's nothing to learn from these races. History will discard them soon enough. So do we leave human colonies for aliens to prey upon, or do we claim their precious worlds to feed strength to the newborn Imperium? Do we allow these people to linger in ignorance and risk harming themselves – or us – or do we crush them before they can become a heretical threat?'

'But—'

'No.' Argel Tal's voice was cold stone. 'There is no *"but"* this time. "The Imperium is right, and that makes it mighty", so say our iterators, so the Word is written, and so shall it be. We succeed where every other human culture has failed. We rise where alien breeds fall. We defeat every solar empire or lonely world that refuses benevolent unity. What more evidence is needed that we, and we alone, walk the right path?'

Cyrene fell silent, chewing her lower lip. 'That… makes sense.'

'Of course it does. It's the truth.'

'So they are all dead. A whole world. Will you tell me what their last city looked like?'

'If you wish.' Argel Tal regarded the young woman for a long moment. She had healed well in the last four weeks, now clad in

the shapeless grey robe of a Legion servant. When he'd first seen her wearing the uniform of a serf, she'd asked him what colour her new clothing was.

'Grey,' he'd said.

'Good,' she smiled at his answer, but didn't elaborate.

Argel Tal watched her now. She stared at him blindly, her youthful features unclouded by shyness or doubt. 'Why are you curious about their city?' he asked.

'I remember Monarchia,' she said 'It is only right that someone remembers this city as well.'

'I'm unlikely to forget it, Cyrene. Spires of glass, and warriors formed from moving crystal. It was not a long compliance, but neither was it an easy one.'

'Was Xaphen with you? He's very kind to me. I like him.'

'Yes,' said Argel Tal. 'Xaphen was with me. He was the first of Seventh Company to see the enemy's blasphemy, when the city's force shield came down.'

'Will you tell me what happened?'

'CAPTAIN,' XAPHEN VOXED. 'You're not going to believe what I'm seeing.'

Argel Tal advanced through the outlying ruins, flanked by Torgal Assault Squad. His grey-clad brothers moved through the streets, crunching on shards of fallen glass architecture. Idling chainswords rumbled in every warrior's gauntlets. Each toothed blade bore bloodstains.

'This is Argel Tal,' the captain voxed back. 'We're to the west – no resistance worth noting. Status report.'

'Artificials,' Xaphen's voice was flawed by vox-distortion, but his disgust came through clear enough. 'They're deploying artificials.'

Argel Tal turned to the east, where the city of veined black stone and glass was already beginning to crack and splinter. Fire ran unchecked along the roads winding towards the city's heart – the clearest sign of the Legion's advance.

'Torgal Assault Squad inbound,' he voxed. 'Word Bearers, with me.'

The bulky thrusters on his back cycled into life, propelling him skyward with a throaty roar.

The altitude gauge on his retinal display pulsed as it updated, overlaying the blue-tinted view through his eye lenses. Low towers of twisting glass and spiralling streets sailed by below. Here was a culture that bred architects who danced to their own tunes. The captain wasn't sure if it was artistic license or the work of some logical process he couldn't fathom. Still, a city of toughened alien glass… Roads of black stone…

It was beautiful, in a way. Madness often possessed a certain loveliness.

'I see you,' he voxed to Xaphen. Beneath him, squads of Word Bearers moved through the ruins of a levelled city block, pockets of grey armour engaged against a silver abomination that crackled with unhealthy energies. His armour's receptive systems picked up on his confusion, and zoomed in on the enemy warriors.

Argel Tal still wasn't sure what he was looking at.

'Down,' he commanded Torgal Squad. Acknowledgement pulses answered over the vox. Argel Tal killed his thrust with an instinctive thought – a flashing Colchisian rune on his visor display changed from red to white. With a judder, the jump pack's primary boosters cut out. Smoke trailed from the deactivated wide-mouth thrusters as secondary jets fired, slowing his plummeting descent to a speed just shy of terminal.

He came down hard, his armoured boots crunching the road beneath his weight, sending cracks cobwebbing through the black stone. In a wave of howling engine wash and road-cracking landings, the rest of his warriors came down in a loose pack around him.

'Stars above,' said Torgal, gesturing over the devastation with his purring chainsword. 'I see what the Chaplain meant.'

Across the ruined vista of tumbledown glass walls, one of the enemy artificials came on three insectile legs: each with too many

joints, and each ending in a blade that spiked the ground with every step. Its torso could almost have been humanoid, but for the fact it was made entirely from moving glass. Beneath its transparent skin, circuits formed veins, metal bars made bones.

'That has to be ornamental,' Torgal said over the vox, as the artificial glided closer on bladed limbs. 'I mean… just look at it.'

'You took your damn time,' said Xaphen. 'Get into cover before it fires again.'

Argel Tal made a break for a nearby glass wall, where a handful of Xaphen's warriors were crouching. They weren't hidden, but it was cover nevertheless. The rest of his assault squad spread out.

'It fires?' Argel Tal asked. 'Are you certain it's not an automated statue, and you've been engaging some of the local art in a heroic battle?'

'It fires,' Xaphen grunted. 'And it won't die. Watch this. Malnor Squad, engage.'

From a crater ahead, several Word Bearers rose in trained unity, each of them opening up with bolt pistols. Shells hammered into the glass creature's body, knocking it off-balance but inflicting no visible damage. Electrical force sparked where each bolt round punched home, detonating the shells before they inflicted anything more than minor kinetic annoyance.

'Cease fire and fall back,' Xaphen ordered.

'I'm growing tired of hearing that order, sir,' Malnor's voice crackled, but the bolter fire stopped.

The creature immediately righted itself, and veered towards where Malnor's warriors crouched in cover. The circuitry serving as its innards flared with phosphorous anger, and eye-aching electricity speared from its open mouth to dance across the edge of the crater, melting the black stone wherever it touched.

'It's made of unbreakable glass,' Torgal voxed, 'and it vomits lightning. The primarch was right to order these people dead. They are more than heretics – they forge insanity into physical form.'

Argel Tal swore softly as he listened to vox-reports of Legion squads encountering these things all over the city. With the capital's protective shield down, he'd expected this to be easy. The planetary leaders were supposed to dead, damn it. Why wasn't resistance crumbling?

'Torgal Squad, to higher ground.'

'By your word, captain,' chorused the loyal responses. Heat haze rippled the air around each warrior as their bulky jump thrusters cycled back to life. The air was rich with charcoalish engine-stink.

Argel Tal boosted up, straight as a spear, coming down on a balcony overlooking the ruined street. The warriors of Torgal Squad followed, finding their own perches on the edges of nearby rooftops. Grey gargoyles, watching the battle below.

'How many have you destroyed so far?' asked Argel Tal.

'Three, but two were downed by a Vindicator from Firestorm.' Xaphen referred to the Serrated Sun's armour battalion.

'Don't tell me the tank was destroyed.'

Malnor answered this time. 'Then I won't tell you, captain. But it's not here anymore.'

Argel Tal watched the artificial stalking closer, maintaining its inhuman balance on those multi-jointed legs despite the punishing terrain. His visor zoomed in deep, clearing after a moment's distortion. Silver veins threaded through the construct's torso, flickering with power. Its skin moved like liquid glass, yet bolter shells sparked aside, as harmless as rainfall.

'You said you've killed three of these, but the tanks destroyed two.'

'I killed the third with my crozius,' Xaphen replied. 'The constructs seem vulnerable to power weapons.'

'Understood. Leave this one to us.' Argel Tal refocused his visor. 'Torgal Squad, at the ready. We'll fight fire with fire.'

'By your word,' came the voice chorus again.

Argel Tal drew both swords – each a red-iron blade housing generators in the ivory crosspieces. His fingers slid to the triggers

along the leather-wrapped grips, and twin hums droned as the blades came alive, coated in jagged licks of electrical force.

'For the primarch!' The shout echoed across the street, drawing the artificial's attention. It looked up with a featureless face – where a man's mouth would be, the glass visage glowed with rising heat.

Argel Tal took two running steps; the first sent tremors through the balcony, the second shattered the railing as he kicked off from it, leaping into the air. His thrusters roared, breathing smoke and fire as he fell from sky. The twin blades trailed blurs of lightning.

'Aurelian!' the warriors of Torgal Squad cried out, leaping from their eyries to slice through the air, following their captain down on whining engines. *'Aurelian!'*

Argel Tal led the dive, hurling himself to the side as burning electricity arced up from the artificial below. A second later he was on the creature, twisting around it to bring his boot crashing against its glass head. Chips of diamond sprayed away as its skull snapped back. Both power swords fell a heartbeat later, the blades hammering into the artificial's face. More twinkling shards scattered like hailstones.

Sergeant Torgal landed on the automaton's shoulders from behind, his chainsword skidding and scraping along the glass. His bolter barked once, a shell hammering uselessly aside before detonating in the air.

With grunts of effort leaving their helm-speakers like avian cries, the rest of Torgal's squad descended and added their grinding blades to the assault. They attacked in waves, thrusting skyward while those beneath struck, then diving for another strike as their brothers boosted away. The artificial staggered, reeling under the host's attack, unable to bring its defences to bear against a single threat.

Argel Tal dived a third time, rasping his sword blades against each other, causing their overlapping power fields to hiss and spit. This time, the blades bit, both carving into the glass throat, sending diamond shards clattering against Argel Tal's faceplate.

The construct died instantly. Its silver veins turned black, and it toppled to the dust on dead legs.

With sedate grace, the five warriors of Torgal Assault Squad drifted to the ground around their captain. Chainblades growled softer as trigger fingers relaxed. Jump thrusters exhaled as they cooled.

Xaphen and Malnor led their warriors from the ruins, bolters held across chestplates.

'Nicely done,' said the Chaplain. 'Move ahead if you wish, brother. We will purge the road to the city's heart. Don't wait on our account.'

Argel Tal nodded, still not used to Xaphen's repainted armour. The Chaplain's warplate was black – darkened in remembrance of the ashes coating every warrior's armour in Monarchia. Argel Tal had said nothing when he'd first witnessed this new tradition, but it still rankled. Some shames were better left forgotten.

A spurt of detuned vox preceded another broken voice. 'Captain, this is Dagotal.'

Argel Tal looked to the spires making up the city's core. Something there – some hidden machinery – was playing havoc with the communication channels.

'I'm here, Dagotal.'

'Requesting permission to summon Carthage.'

Xaphen and Malnor exchanged glances, their faceplates concealing their expressions. Torgal gunned his chainsword, the teeth chewing air for a few seconds.

'Specifics, Dagotal,' said Argel Tal.

'It's the artificials, sir. They have a king.'

DAGOTAL SQUAD KEPT moving through the streets, never going to ground, always watching. As Seventh Company's outriders, penetrating a hostile city far ahead of the captain's main force was nothing new.

This enemy, however, brought some foul surprises with them. The army of artificials stalking through the doomed city were

putting up ferocious resistance – and that was before the Word Bearers advance forces began to encounter the Obsidians.

Dagotal was one of the first to spot one. He'd leaned forward in his saddle, forcing his visor to zoom and track the black construct making its ponderous way along the street ahead.

'Blood of the Urizen,' he swore. The thing was two storeys tall – an artificial on six legs, its torso cut not from clear glass, but opaque black.

He'd voxed the captain immediately, while his squad opened fire. The bolters mounted on each bike chattered and crashed. The black glass construct didn't deign to notice. Despite the artificial's apparent weight, its bladed limbs didn't impale down into the road.

'Fall back,' Dagotal ordered his brothers. And they had – at speed.

The grey bikes snarled as they banked around a winding corner, tyres struggling to grip the smooth black stone of the road. Korus swerved in the lead, his braking wheels screeching as they sheared over the road's surface.

'Careful,' Dagotal warned.

'Easy for you to say, sergeant,' Korus snapped.

Dagotal weaved between his brothers' bikes, effortlessly outpacing them. His jetbike hovered two metres above the road, bucking forward with engine wails and bursts of acceleration at the merest pressure from his hands on the throttle. The jetbike ran cleaner than its grounded cousins, its power generator venting much less exhaust than the wheeled bikes in Dagotal's squad.

The Word Bearer leaned to his right, sliding around another of the glass city's insane spiralling corners. He slowed – if only a little – allowing his brothers to keep pace. From between two spires ahead, another immense artificial came forward on six legs, lightning ringing its faceless black skull in a radiant halo.

'Another artificial,' Dagotal voxed. He used the name already being cried out by Word Bearer squad leaders over the vox. 'It's another one of the Obsidians.'

'We're being boxed in,' said Korus, drawing alongside. 'Do we engage?'

'For what? To waste shells?' Dagotal accelerated, feeling the drag in his arms as the jetbike's thrumming engine wailed louder. 'Follow me.'

He veered left, taking another corner into a secondary street.

'We can't keep running,' Korus growled. 'Our fuel's going to give out if we keep this up.'

Dagotal heard the whine of thirsty engines as his men took the corner behind him. Korus was right – their bikes' growls were getting dry, and the squad had been playing a game of cat and mouse through these streets for hours now, scouting ahead of the Serrated Sun's main forces.

'We're not running,' he replied.

A shadow darkened the street, eclipsing the sun and filling the air with the grind of powerful engines. The sleek craft hovering overhead bore the bionic skull symbol of the Martian priesthood on its wings.

Dagotal smiled behind his faceplate. 'We're looking for somewhere Carthage can land.'

FROM BENEATH A red hood, three green eye lenses peered out at the burning city. This triad of visual receptors continually turned and refocused, each lens tuning to degrees of acuity that went far beyond the capacity of human sight.

'Processing,' the owner of the three eyes said. And then, after a pause of several seconds, during which the lenses continued to tune and retune, he added 'Acknowledged' in the same tone.

Dagotal's outriders were using this chance to refuel, each Astartes filling their bike's tanks with canisters of promethium taken from the Mechanicum lander's hold.

Dagotal remained on his jetbike, the humming gravity suspensors pulsing quieter now they weren't suffering strain.

'Two Obsidians,' he said to the three-eyed man, 'coming this way.' The vox was on fire with squads falling back, summoning

help from the Carthage Cohort, requesting armour battalions… 'The artificials are brutal, Xi-Nu.'

'I am cognizant of the details, Sergeant Dagotal.'

Xi-Nu 73 was a stick-thin being, human only in the loosest sense. His red robe flapped in the heated wind, revealing an augmented body of lustreless iron bound together by industrial cabling. His arms, which he now raised in order to lower his hood, were a skeleton's limbs constructed from contoured armour plating, ending in bronze hands with too many fingers. His face, such as it was, appeared from the lowered hood as a mess of thin wires and a noisy respiration mask, with no other discernible features beyond the green eye lenses that formed a triangle's cardinal points.

Xi-Nu 73 had been human once – almost a century ago in the short, fragile two decades after his birth. Like all of the Mechanicum of Mars, he'd had to endure those early years living in a shell of warm meat and wet blood, until he gained the skill to purify himself.

He'd improved himself a great deal since then.

The tech-priest stood by the Mechanicum lander's cargo ramp, overseeing the ungainly march of several towering figures. Each one was clad in dense armour plating painted in chipped coats of crimson. They stood almost five metres tall, their mechanical joints not even attempting to mimic human motion. The first two down the clanging ramp were gangly Crusaders, their long bladed arms swinging as their shoulders rocked side to side in awkward motion. Circuitry, thick and crude, was etched along the arm-swords' edges, linking the blades to power generators in the robots' bodies.

–*Sanguine*– said the first, vocalising in tinny machine tones, –*standing ready*–.

–*Alizarin*– the second intoned, –*standing ready*–.

The third figure to stomp down the ramp was twice the width of the first two, bulky where the Crusaders were gangly, great fists of riveted metal fused to form siege hammers. Even more than its kin, it reeked of greased machine parts and the earthy

scent of lubricating oils. The Cataphract-class machine was hunched, made dense by sloping armour, and moved with even less claim to grace than the others.

–*Vermillion*– it droned as it clanked in line with the Crusaders, –*standing ready*–.

Xi-Nu 73 turned his eye lenses to regard the last machine emerging from the lander's hold. This one seemed a compromise between its construct-kin, almost human in its posture and gait, armoured with thick plating and bearing weapons for arms. A third cannon rose from its shoulder, with ammunition belts trailing down its back, dreadlocks of bronze shells rattling with each step. Dagotal knew each of Xi-Nu's wards, familiar with them from twelve years of sharing battlefields. This last was a Conqueror, and the primus unit of the group. It wore a Legion banner over its shoulder, and its armour plating was etched with Colchisian runes.

Several of the Word Bearers saluted this last robotic warrior. It didn't acknowledge them.

–*Incarnadine*– the Conqueror declared in a voice devoid of personality, –*standing ready*–.

Xi-Nu 73 turned to the gathered Word Bearers, his eyes refocusing yet again. 'Greetings, sergeant. Ninth Maniple of the Carthage Cohort, awaiting orders.'

ARGEL TAL HIT the ground running, the boosters on his back cycling down as he ran. Both blades were sheathed; in his fists, a richly-inscribed bolter bucked with each fired shell. He took refuge with several of his warriors in the lowest level of a glass tower, shooting out of the stained glass windows. Whatever patterns the coloured glass once held were gone, smashed through by Word Bearers needing clear lines of fire.

The Obsidian in the street outside dwarfed them all, liberally blasting the road with streams of electrical force from its featureless face. Argel Tal reloaded, and as he slammed a fresh magazine home, he had a momentary glance of a glass shard by his

boot – a fragment of the stained glass window showing a figure in golden armour.

Dagotal Squad was running interference, weaving between the artificial's insect-legs, veering and jinking to avoid its lethal arcs of fire. Bolter shells hammered into its joints from where Torgal's men took what cover they could find, but their efforts were little more than an irritant.

'Xi-Nu 73,' Argel Tal voxed. 'We're in position. Make this fast.'

'Acknowledged, Seventh Captain.'

They came from behind the construct, emerging from a subsidiary road. Sanguine and Alizarin stalked forward first with all the grace of stumbling beggars, their movements a stark contrast to the liquid grace of the enemy machine. Lascannon fire streamed from the shoulder mounts of both Crusaders, carving searing scars into the Obsidian's skin, the sludge-gleam of melted glass bright against the black. Their arm-blades came up on clanking, motorised hinge joints, slicing down to chop at the construct's legs.

Recognising this new threat, the Obsidian span to face the Mechanicum war machines. It turned into a barrage of gunfire, shoulder-mounted heavy bolters punching shards from the construct's face and torso with a torrent of explosive shells. *Incarnadine*, regal in form compared to its brothers, tracked every movement made by the enemy machine. It didn't cease fire, even for a second. Nor did a single shot go wide.

The Obsidian's storm-stream wasted itself, blasting up at the sky as the Mechanicum robotics knocked it off-balance.

The Cataphract-class *Vermillion*, as bulky as an Astartes Dreadnought, was an altogether more ponderous engine. Stocky and lumbering, it closed the distance as the Obsidian sought to right itself on its four remaining legs. Siege hammers swung in, meeting alien glass with a thunderclap's refrain. Four legs became three – the glass machine crashed to the knees it had left.

'Finish it,' said Argel Tal. His jump pack burned again, groaning as the engines drew breath.

'By your word,' came the vox-replies.

The swords came free in smooth pulls, and Argel Tal let a short burst of thrust carry him skyward. Even prone, the Obsidian offered no purchase. As the Word Bearers came down in its back, most elected to hover, burning their jump jets rather than standing upon the thing's body. Swords clashed and carved, but only Argel Tal's empowered blades inflicted significant damage, sending shards of dark glass flying with each hack.

Even as it died, the Obsidian dragged itself across the street, a grasping hand reaching for the closest true threat. *Incarnadine* stepped back, autocannons laying into the outstretched hand, shearing fingers from the fist. Behind the Imperial war machine, Xi-Nu watched with unwavering attention, occasionally adjusting dials on his chestplate for reasons none of the Word Bearers had ever discerned, despite a decade of fighting by his side.

When the Obsidian lay still at last, Argel Tal and Dagotal came over to the tech-priest. The downed enemy construct had a shapeless resemblance to a melting ice statue, its body ruined by a thousand bullet impacts, blade cuts and lascannon beams. Both Word Bearers crunched closer on the glass shards lining the road.

'Greetings, captain,' said Xi-Nu 73. 'Ninth Maniple of the Carthage Cohort, awaiting orders.'

CYRENE PAUSED ARGEL Tal's retelling with a hand on his forearm.

'You used artificials yourself?'

He'd been expecting this. 'The Legio Cybernetica is a treasured facet of the Mechanicum. The Great Crusade leans heaviest on the Legio Titanicus for their war engines, but Cybernetica plays its role among the noblest Astartes Legions. Their artificials are robotic shells housing machine-spirits. Cybernetica tech-priests engineer organic-synthetic minds from biological components.'

Cyrene reached for the glass of water on her bedside table. Her fingers slid across the metal surface, bumping the glass gently before she got a grip. When she drank, it was in little swallows, and she seemed in no rush to speak again.

'You don't see the difference,' Argel Tal said, not quite asking.

She lowered the glass, facing him without seeing him. 'Is there a difference?'

'Do not ask that question to Xi-Nu 73, should your paths ever cross. He'd be insulted enough to kill you, and I would be vexed enough to kill him in return. Suffice to say, the difference is in the mind. Organic intelligence, even synthetic in nature, is still tied to the perfection of humanity. Artificial intelligence is not. That's a lesson many cultures only learn when their machine slaves rise up against them, as the Obsidians would have done one day, to the people of Forty-Seven Sixteen.'

'You always say we are perfect. Humans, I mean.'

'So it is written in the Word.'

'But the Word changes over time. Xaphen tells me it's changing even now. Are humans really perfect?'

'We're conquering the galaxy, aren't we? The evidence of our purity and manifest destiny is clear.'

'Other races conquered it all before we did.' She took another sip of the room-temperature water. 'Perhaps others will conquer it after we do something wrong.' Then she smiled, brushing a lock of hair back from her face. 'You are so certain in everything you do. I envy you for that.'

'Were you not sure of your own life's path back in Monarchia?'

She tilted her head, and he read a faint tension in her body language – the slight curl of her bare toes, the fingers gently clutching her grey robe. 'I don't wish to speak of that,' she said. 'I just find it curious that you have no regrets. No doubts.'

The Astartes wasn't sure how to answer. 'It's not confidence. It's… duty. I live by the Word. What is written must come to be, else all will come to nothing.'

'That sounds like a great sacrifice to me. Fate shaped you into a weapon.' Cyrene's smile was tinged with an expression somewhere between amusement and melancholy. 'The Speakers would say such things in their dawn prayers across the perfect city. "Walk the one true way, for all other paths lead to destruction".'

'That's from the Word,' said Argel Tal. 'Part of the primarch's wisdom we left to guide your people.'

She waved a hand, batting aside his devotion to every detail. 'I know, I know. Will you tell me the rest of the story? I want to know more of the city. Did the primarch fight with you?'

The captain took a breath. The girl's mind moved with fleeting touches between subjects.

'No. But we saw him at dawn. Before we reached his side, we crossed paths with Aquillon.'

'Tell me what happened,' said Cyrene. She lay down on her bed, making a pillow of her joined hands. For what use they were, her eyes remained open. 'I'm not sleeping. Please, go on. Who is Aquillon?'

'His title is Occuli Imperator,' Argel Tal replied. 'The Emperor's Eyes. We encountered him as the sun set, while most of the city burned.'

EIGHT

Like Home
Gold, not Grey
At the Heart of a Fallen City

AS DUSK FELL over the city's remains, Argel Tal stood in battered armour, watching the amber disc sink beneath the horizon. It was a beautiful sunset, putting him in mind of Colchis, of home, of the world he'd not seen in almost seven decades. To his recollection, which bordered on eidetic, Argel Tal had seen the sun set on twenty-nine worlds. This was the thirtieth, and as lovely as the first.

The sky darkened in shades of blue and violet, heralding the coming night.

'Chaplain,' he said, 'to me.'

Xaphen left the regrouping Word Bearers, walking to the captain at the end of the street.

'Brother,' Xaphen greeted him. Without his helm, the Chaplain watched the setting sun with naked eyes. 'What do you need?'

Argel Tal nodded to the fading heavens. 'Reminds me of home.'

He heard the faint growl of armour joints as Xaphen moved. A shrug, perhaps.

'Where is Torgal and the Assault Squad?'

'Scouting along the spire-tops,' the captain said. 'I will be glad when this world is at compliance, Xaphen. Despite the need to see battle, this is a hollow war.'

'As you say, brother. What do you need?' the Chaplain repeated.

Argel Tal refused eye contact.

'Answers,' he said, 'before we return to orbit. The primarch remains away from us for a month, and the Legion's warrior-priests gather in silence. What happens at the gatherings of those who wear the Black?'

Xaphen snorted, already turning away. 'Now is hardly the time. We've a world to bring to compliance.'

'Do not walk away from me, Chaplain.'

Their gazes met – the captain's slanted eye lenses locked to the Chaplain's narrowed eyes. 'What is it?' asked Xaphen. 'What has you so unfocused?' His tone mellowed, conciliatory despite its sternness. Argel Tal knew the voice well. It was how Xaphen spoke when warriors brought their doubts to him. Without knowing why, Argel Tal found it tainting his temper.

The captain aimed his sword down the street, where two squads were tending to their wounded. Much of the roadway was taken up by the corpse of another Obsidian, and Dagotal's bikes undergoing battlefield repair by Xi-Nu 73.

'We are all blind,' said the captain, 'except you. We are fighting as ordered, exterminating a heretic culture. And Aurelian was right – it is a purge of the past, and good for the blood. The Legion needed to stand in victory after gathering to commemorate failure. But after a month of silence since the perfect city's grave, we are still blind.'

'What would you have me say?' Xaphen approached again, his gauntlet lifted as calculating indecision played across his features. He withdrew the hand, sensing if he rested it on Argel Tal's shoulder, it would aggravate the captain, not remind him of kinship.

'I would have you answer the question and enlighten your brothers, as your duty demands.'

Xaphen exhaled, and his patience left with his breath. 'The gatherings of those in Black are inviolate and sacrosanct. None of us may speak of what transpires. You know this, yet still you ask? What of tradition, brother?'

Argel Tal lowered the sword. 'What tradition?' he laughed. 'What of a Legion kneeling in the dust, and our primarch offer-

ing us nothing but silence for a month? The rest of us need answers, Xaphen. *I* need answers.'

'By your word, captain. But all I may say are words I've spoken before. We look to the Word, and seek a new path. The Legion is lost, and we seek the answers to guide it again. Do you begrudge us that? Should we linger, lost in the void, cast from the Emperor's light?'

Argel Tal felt acidic saliva stinging under his tongue. 'Meanwhile, the Legion waits and wages war, equally blind in both states. Do the Chaplains have the answers they sought?'

'Yes, brother. We believe so.'

'And when did you plan to share these truths with us?'

Xaphen drew his crozius, clutching it in both hands as he turned back to the gathered squads. 'Why do you think we came here? Purely to end these miserable blasphemers? To wipe this pathetic empire of one lonely world from the face of history?'

'If you find my insight lacking,' the captain spoke through clenched teeth, 'then enlighten me.'

'Peace, my brother. Lorgar knows the value of symbolism, and the purity of purpose. We followed a false path that ended in a city of ashes. In another city of ashes, we will take the first steps on the true path. He will show us the way, and we will perform the Rite of Remembrance as it should be performed, with honour and sincerity. Not collared by the Emperor and abused like disloyal hounds.'

This was, and wasn't, a surprise to Argel Tal. It didn't take a prophet to predict the primarch would speak after this compliance, but to have it framed as some first step on a new odyssey was both captivating and unnerving.

'I lament that the Chaplain brotherhood kept this from us, but I thank you for speaking at last.'

'There was little to tell before the primarch's return today. It's no secret, in truth.' Warmth returned to Xaphen's craggy face as he smiled. 'I expect word is filtering through the Legion even now. Aurelian will meet us in the heart of the city, once we've extinguished the last of this world's unholy life. And this time,

when the Legion kneels in the dust of a dead city, it will be because that city died in righteous flame.'

The vox chose that moment to crackle back to life.

'Sir? Sir?'

'This is Argel Tal. Speak, Torgal.'

'Captain, I apologise for another unpleasant surprise, but you won't believe what I'm looking at.'

Argel Tal swore under his breath, the clipped Colchisian syllables not carrying over the vox. He was growing tired of hearing those words on this world.

THE FIVE WARRIORS killed in silence, their glaives spinning with the force and speed of turbine rotors, lashing through limbs and torsos with the ease of knives through mist. At last, with the Legion breaching deep into the city, Imperial forces encountered human resistance. The army of constructs seemed defeated, reduced to scattered pockets. It fell to the militia and the civilian population to die fighting, taking to the streets armed with weapons that would prove useless, seeking to squander their lives rather than surrender them.

Small-arms fire clattered from the warriors' gold-wrought armour as they battled through the crowded street. The militia squads against them carried rifles that spat a solid shot not far removed from the smallest-calibre bolter shells. The culture's ancestral connection to humanity's pre-Imperial era was proven beyond dispute – and yet they were damned by their deviance.

Despite their worthless weaponry, they stood their ground in cover or arrayed in firing lines until they were overwhelmed. Their planet was finished and their final city was aflame. With nowhere to run, most simply didn't try. They died in their uniforms, which were the same grey as the city's architecture. Faceplates of clear glass shattered under stabbing blades as the spear-bearing warriors scythed into another phalanx of human militia.

The Custodes leader was obvious as he led the advance, his conic helm crested with a plume of red horsehair. In his hands, an immense two-handed sword span in blurring arcs, rising and

falling, stabbing and carving. People tumbled away from him, some of them screaming, all of them falling to pieces in his wake. He killed and killed and killed, never missing a lethal strike, never slowing in his advance. Beneath his feet, the road ran red – the beginnings of a sick river, sourced by blood.

'Aquillon,' said Argel Tal from his vantage point above the carnage. He shook his head as he spoke the name. Unfeigned awe softened his voice. 'I've never seen a Custodian fight.'

Several Word Bearers crouched at the lip of a roof overlooking the street. Argel Tal, Torgal, and the sergeant's assault squad. The golden warriors moved ahead with consummate grace, the dance of their blades eclipsing anything a mortal could perform.

'I've never seen anything like it,' Torgal said. 'Should we join them?'

From below, a shout rose above the butchery. *For the Emperor* – a battlecry that hadn't left a Word Bearer's lips since Monarchia. Strange, how it sounded almost alien to Argel Tal's ears.

'No,' the captain replied. 'Not yet.'

Torgal watched for several more moments, one finger idly stroking his chainword's trigger. 'There's something about the way they fight,' he said. 'Some flaw that I can't make out.'

Argel Tal watched Aquillon, the Custodian's blade reaving its way through countless lives, and saw nothing of the kind. He said so.

Torgal shook his head, still watching. 'I can't form the thought. They lack… something. They're fighting… wrong.'

And this time, as soon as Argel Tal returned his gaze to the battle in the street, he saw it instantly. The way the Custodes fought seemed almost identical to the Astartes; it took a trained eye to see the subtle differences. The captain had missed it first by focusing on a single warrior. The moment he took in the full view…

'There,' said Argel Tal. 'I see it, too.'

Was it a flaw? Perhaps by the standards of the Astartes, who waged war and lived life with brotherhood etched into their genetic codes. But Custodes were the sons of a more rarefied and

time-consuming process – the biological manipulation that gave birth to the Emperor's guardians bred warriors who weren't shackled by bonds of loyalty to anyone except their Imperial overlord.

'They're not brothers,' Argel Tal said. 'Watch how they move. See how each one fights his own war, alone, unsupported by the others. They're not like us. These are warriors, not soldiers.'

The thought made his skin crawl. It must have had the same effect on Torgal, for he voiced the words on his captain's mind.

'Lions,' the sergeant said. 'They're lions, not wolves, hunting alone instead of as a pack. Gold,' he added, and tapped the chestplate of his armour, 'not grey.'

'Good eyes, brother.' Argel Tal still stared intently. Now he was aware of the disunity, it was all he could focus on. Here was a weakness, a savage one, masked only by the heroic skills of each warrior and the worthlessness of the enemies they faced.

A ripple of unease shivered through him as he bore witness. Those ancient words of the Emperor came to him, that first creed of the Legiones Astartes: *And they shall know no fear.*

Argel Tal was one of those who took the creed in its most literal sense, believing the sensitivity to feel fear was rewritten out of him at the genetic level. But even so, watching these brotherless cousins fight chilled him to his core. They lacked so much, despite their individual perfection.

'In standing free of brotherhood,' he said, 'they also sacrifice its strengths. The tactics of a pack. The trust in those who fight by your side. I suspect the secrets woven into their body and blood gene-bind them to a higher loyalty – perhaps their only brother is the Emperor himself.'

Torgal was as perceptive as ever. 'You no longer admire them,' he said. 'I hear it in your voice.'

Argel Tal smiled, choosing to let his silence answer for him.

Beneath them, the Custodians fought on. 'That looks like trouble,' one of the assault squad gestured down the road. They watched as a glass construct stalked into the avenue from a side

street, and began to make its way down the thoroughfare towards the golden warriors.

Now Argel Tal rose to his feet. 'Come, brothers. Let's see how the wolves hunt with the lions.'

'By your word,' they chorused in perfect unity, and ten sets of thrusters howled as one.

AQUILLON'S GREETING WAS cautious. He made the sign of the aquila across his breastplate, where the Emperor's two-headed eagle symbol was already in ornate evidence.

'Hail, captain.'

Argel Tal returned the salute, crashing a fist against his chestpiece over his heart – the sign of Imperial allegiance in the Terran Unification Wars.

'Custodian. A pleasure to be of service,' Argel Tal gestured one of his blades at the ruined construct. It lay dead in the road, cut and battered, surrounded by slain militia.

'A curious greeting, captain, to use a salute that fell out of favour before the Great Crusade even began.'

The Word Bearers formed up behind and around Argel Tal, just as the Custodians came to Aquillon's side. It wasn't quite a standoff, but none of the warriors were blind to the spectre of tension between them.

Argel Tal didn't rise to the bait. 'You seemed to need the help. I'm just glad we were here to assist you.'

Aquillon chuckled and walked away, saying nothing more. The Custodes formed up in imprecise formation and marched ahead. Evidently, their leader wasn't rising to any bait, either.

'Sir?' asked Torgal. 'Should we go with them?'

Argel Tal was smiling despite himself.

'Yes. For what little there is left to do, we'll fight with them.'

BY DAWN, THE glass city's death-throes were over.

The place chosen for the Legion's gathering was expansive out of necessity, but still deep within the urban sprawl. Crystal towers, purged of life by the Terminator elite, stood unburned

around an immense park. The earth was soon churned to mud under the grinding treads of tanks and the boots of a hundred thousand Astartes. The park itself reached for kilometres in all directions. In better times, it had served as a place of peace and celebration for the people of the city; now it was being used to celebrate their annihilation, and Argel Tal found a quiet pleasure in that little slice of irony.

Seventh Company trickled in – not first, but far from last – and took their appointed places. Xi-Nu 73 and his four robotic warriors knew their place, and made no attempt to approach the assembling rows of Word Bearers. The captain and his squad leaders bid the tech-adept farewell at the edges of the Legion's formation, and the last sight Argel Tal had of the Mechanicum priest was with *Incarnadine*, the Conqueror Primus. The robot stood slightly hunched at its master's side, still towering above the augmetic human, its unliving eye lenses tracking left and right with a camera's patience. Xi-Nu 73 absently stroked its armour plating, as if it were a pet to have its fur patted.

While they stood separate from the Astartes, they were far from alone. Carthage Cohort was comprised of dozens of maniples, of which Xi-Nu's four wards were just one. It looked as though many advancing squads had summoned aid from the Legio Cybernetica forces allied to the XVII Legion, for over a hundred robots stood proud in their black and scarlet livery.

A few rare units had oath parchments and scrolls of scripture bound to their armour plating, marking them as particularly accomplished in battle. These robots, from a variety of classes and designs, were enrolled in the *Fidelitas Lex*'s archives as honorary members of the Word Bearers Legion.

Incarnadine was one of them. The robot bore the serrated sun icon, plated in gold upon its forehead.

Aquillon and the Custodians broke away as Argel Tal and his brothers began to form ranks.

'Be well, captain,' said the leader, and offered another salute.

Argel Tal acknowledged the warrior with a nod. 'And you, Occuli Imperator.'

With that, the Custodes made their way through the gathered Legion to stand apart in a small cluster. Hundreds of grey helms followed the warriors' movements, watching, judging, hating.

Argel Tal and Xaphen moved to the front ranks alongside Chapter Master Deumos and the other commanders of the Serrated Sun. Considering their victory here, the greetings were oddly subdued. It took a moment for Argel Tal to realise why.

'How long were you with them?' Deumos asked, just short of a demand.

Argel Tal glanced at the chron display counting up on the edge of his visor display. 'Eight hours, forty-one minutes.'

Deumos was bareheaded, and his time-cracked face was set in an expectant glower.

'Well?'

'Well, what?' asked Argel Tal. 'Have I erred?'

'Of course not. You have nothing to report?'

'I do, sir.' Argel Tal faced forward. 'But it can wait.'

'Look at them, brother.' Deumos was too careful to gesture, but his meaning was clear nevertheless. 'See how they stand away from us, yet still expect to hear the primarch's words.'

The Custodes stood spear-straight in two lines of ten, horsehair crests blowing in the wind. Halberds held at attention, just as they would be in the Emperor's presence. Products of a refined process, where the Astartes were mass-produced – it was easy to imagine these gilded knights hailed as humanity's finest, beneath only the primarchs themselves in grandeur. It was the natural instinct of the untrained and inexperienced to presume such a thing. For those who perceived their flaws, matters were less cut and dried.

Argel Tal still hadn't decided how he felt about them. They were stunning in battle, yet deeply flawed. Aquillon was appointed to watch over the Legion and report its actions to the Emperor, yet he had – irritatingly enough – been likable during the hours they'd battled together, and a demonstrably focused warrior.

The Word Bearers stood beneath the scripture-laden banner of Seventh Company and the icon of the serrated sun, as they waited for their brothers to take position.

'Carthage stands apart from us, yet they will hear the primarch,' said Argel Tal.

'That's different,' Deumos growled. 'The Carthage Primacy was signed and oathed over a century ago. Almost a dozen of their war machines have been inducted as honorary Legionnaires since then. Aurelian will order them to leave, mark my words, but at least they have *earned* the right to stand with us.'

'Given time, Aquillon might earn the same.'

Deumos laughed, the sudden sound turning nearby heads in his direction. 'Do you actually believe that, captain?'

Argel Tal tore his gaze from the clustered Custodians. 'No, lord. Not for a moment.'

EVEN IN THE scalding flare of teleportation's aftermath, every warrior noticed the same thing. Lorgar manifested not in the armour of the Word Bearers' warlord, but in the robes of an archpriest of their home world.

Kor Phaeron and Erebus stood at the primarch's side, as all had expected, and as tradition dictated. Yet they too wore the cowled robes of the Colchisian priesthood, their genhanced physiques draped in layered cloth the colour of ashen earth.

Oath papers pinned to the captains' armour flapped and curled with the breath of displaced air. Rank by rank, from first to last, a hundred thousand warriors went to one knee. Each lowering rank gave a united thud of ceramite on soil as they knelt. Only the banners remained held high above an ocean of granite grey.

Lorgar carried his crozius over his shoulder, mirroring the posture of every Chaplain in the Legion standing before him. Despite its savagery, the ritual weapon wasn't out of place in the primarch's more peaceful aspect.

Without his armour, he couldn't speak across the vox. To compensate, Legion serfs deployed servo-skulls – the skinned, bleached, augmented skulls of former Legion servants who were

chosen to continue serving the Word Bearers even in death. The skulls hovered on humming anti-grav suspensors, their eye sockets containing pict-imagers, their grinning jaws replaced by vox-speakers.

One of them bobbed past Argel Tal in its leisurely pathfinding, and a disquieting thought was dredged up in the skull's passing. This might be Cyrene's fate one day. If she got her wish to serve the Legion in the decades to come… Argel Tal turned to watch the servo-skull, curious at his own sudden discomfort. Most mortal serfs relished the promise that they might be granted immortality in even this stunted way. But Cyrene—

'What are you doing?' Xaphen hissed. *'Focus.'*

Argel Tal snapped back to attention, facing the primarch. Lorgar had chosen his arrival point with great care, standing atop a natural rise in the land before the orderly ranks of warriors sworn to his name.

Before speaking, the cowl came down, pulled back with sublime patience to reveal his strong, handsome features – the features of his father, but inked gold, with his eyes ringed by kohl. He was the very image of a hierophant preacher in Ancient Gyptus: a faroah's high priest, ministering to the faithful.

'My loyal sons. In the past, you have kneeled for each Rite of Remembrance, as you kneel even now. But no more. Word Bearers… Rise.'

Discipline be damned, the Astartes began to glance at one another, taken aback by their lord's words. This was already unprecedented, and it had barely begun. Surprise and confusion actually had most of the Astartes defying their primarch's order.

'Rise,' Lorgar said, a gentle laugh edging into his speech. 'Rise, all of you. Now is not the time for obeisance.'

Xaphen rose immediately. All of the Chaplains did. Argel Tal stood slower, looking at his friend.

'What's going on?' he asked.

'You'll see,' said Xaphen.

Lorgar's next words weren't for his sons. He gestured with his free hand, the skin gold in the dawn, taking in the small phalanx of warriors at the edge of the sprawling conclave.

'And what have we here?' he asked. The servo-skulls projected his words to the thousands gathered, preserving the gentle voice even through crackling vox. 'Our appointed overseers. I give you the thanks of the Seventeenth Legion for your aid in bringing this heretic world into compliance.'

The twenty Custodes bowed, not quite in unison.

Argel Tal was too far distant to hear Aquillon's words, but the Custodes commander bowed lower than his comrades, and gestured to the gathered Legion.

Lorgar's reply was delivered with the same gentle diplomacy as his gratitude.

'You are correct, Custodian Aquillon. Your tenure with the Seventeenth Legion began under dark skies. However, I must beg your indulgence this once. The words I wish to share with my sons are not for the ears of others.'

Again, Argel Tal had no hope of hearing Aquillon's reply. Lorgar smiled in response, making the sign of the aquila. When the primarch formed the symbol over his grey robe, the gold hands became an aquila akin to those that marked the breastplates of the Emperor's own guardians. Argel Tal doubted any present could miss the gesture's symbolic nature.

'My sons have been shamed, and endured the shattering of their beliefs. I brought them to this world not simply to reforge them in battle, but to speak of the future. And that will be with my sons, and my sons alone. Look to the south, where even our Mechanicum allies withdraw out of respect.'

Argel Tal looked over his shoulder guard, seeing the primarch's words taking shape as the Mechanicum withdrew. Only the few robots granted honorary Legion inductance were remaining. *Incarnadine* stood motionless, the Word Bearers banner draped over its shoulders like a cloak of royalty.

Lorgar smiled his father's smile, cutting off Aquillon's reply. 'Every Legion has its rites and observations, Aquillon. The Rite

of Remembrance is one of ours. Would you impose upon the Wolves of Russ when they howl around the stone cairns of their fallen? Would you intrude upon the Sons of Prospero as they meditate on the perfection of human potential?'

Aquillon stepped forward now. A floating servo-skull picked up his reply and broadcast the words across to the gathered Legion.

'If the Emperor, beloved by all, ordered me to watch over those Legions…'

Lorgar clasped his hands together, his smile of indulgence so earnest that it bordered on mockery.

'I was there when my brother Guilliman gave you your orders, Aquillon. You are to ensure the Word Bearers apply themselves wholeheartedly to the Great Crusade. And I – we, all of us – thank you for your presence. But you are breaching decorum now. You are showing us disrespect, and violating our traditions.'

'I mean no offence,' said Aquillon, 'but my duty is clear.'

Lorgar nodded, feigning sympathy for their intentions. It was a sour display, and Argel Tal wasn't sure whether to laugh or feel shamed by it.

'But let us not exceed your mandate,' the primarch said. 'You are not entitled to watch over me like a pack of prison wardens. I am the Emperor's son, formed by his mastery in order to carry out his will. You are a flock of genetic toys pieced together in a laboratory from vials of biological scrap. You are so far beneath me that I wouldn't piss on your bodies even if you were aflame. So… let me be clear, in the spirit of preventing future misunderstandings.'

Aquillon stepped forward, but Lorgar halted him in his tracks with a single name.

'Kor Phaeron.'

As soon as the name was spoken, the First Captain's voice rasped across the vox. 'All Word Bearers, take aim at the Custodes.'

Unlike the order to rise, this one brought no hesitation. The ranks of Word Bearers raised their bolters or gunned chainswords into life.

'Farewell,' said Lorgar, still wearing his father's smile. 'We will see you in orbit soon.'

Two servitors shared the weight of a bulky teleportation beacon the size and shape of a reinforced oil drum. The bionic slaves trundled from the Astartes' front ranks, unceremoniously dumping the bronze and black iron marvel of engineering on the ground. As Aquillon stood unmoving, staring up at Lorgar, the beacon toppled and clanked onto the grass.

'You may use this to return to the *Fidelitas Lex,'* the primarch said. 'Go in peace.'

'Very well,' Aquillon hesitated before reaching down to set the beacon right. 'By your word.'

'HE JUST LEFT?' Cyrene asked. Her nose wrinkled, either in confusion or distaste, Argel Tal wasn't sure which.

'He had no choice,' the captain replied.

'And then what happened?'

'And then… the primarch looked out over the Legion. He watched us for what felt like an age. And at last, just before speaking, he smiled.'

'What did he speak of?'

'Two things.' Argel Tal looked away from her. 'Firstly, an ancient belief called the Pilgrimage, to seek a place where gods and mortals meet. And then, he spoke of Colchis.'

'Your home world?' there was wonder in her voice. *Colchis. The cradle of angels.*

'Yes,' Argel Tal replied, seeing the reverence in her features. 'We're going home.'

NINE

Crimson King
The City of Grey Flowers
Blessed Lady

COLCHIS IS A thirsty world.

Depending on the speaker, those words were voiced with a smile or a curse. But they remained true: the continents were raw with thirst, and the world itself was marked by memories.

At three times the size of Terra, with a fraction of the population, it took almost five standard years to turn once around its merciless sun. And it turned with great patience: a day lasting a Terran week, a week lasting a Terran month.

From orbit, its skin was a visage of unforgiving mountain ranges and auburn desert plains, veined by threading rivers. It was in dry lands like these that that humanity's ancestors – the very first men and women on the world no longer called Earth – rose in lands that would become known as the cradle of civilisation.

Colchis was aboriginal in the same way. Mankind had been born in lands kin to those blanketing its surface, making Colchis an Earth that might have been, rather than the Terra that was.

Over the generations, civilisation had spread itself thin across the arid continents, with most cities clinging to the coasts. Each city-state maintained links to the others though sky trade and ocean freight, on a world where roads across the desert plains would be little more than folly.

Unlike much of the emergent Imperium, Colchis was unprotected by vast orbital weapon platforms. More tellingly, it also had little in the way of the industrious space stations responsible

for feeding and refuelling parasitic expeditionary fleets in their crusades through the galaxy.

Colchis still bore scars of long-forgotten greatness – an age of wonders, ended in fire. In that sense, it was a future echo of what Khur had so recently become. The world's surface was bruised dark by the bones of dead cities, fallen in unrecorded ages, never resettled. New cities rose elsewhere with the genesis of a simpler, quieter culture. The ancient ruins suggested a machine-driven empire once ruled Colchis, though little evidence ever came to light regarding its destruction. The lost kingdom's legacy was evident even in orbit, where drifting, dead hulks – locked in orbits that would still take millennia to completely decay – marked the graves of interstellar shipyards.

Few Imperial fleets ventured near Colchis, and not merely because of its lack of resupply capacity. Rumours circulated, citing unreliable shipping lanes, and the disappearance of the 2,188th Expeditionary Fleet in a nearby region, added fuel to that particular fire. Colchis seemed a world focused upon looking inwards, even backwards, refusing to clear its skies of wreckage from the Dark Age of Technology, and resisting all Imperial edicts to establish new orbital bases. The planet's one concession was to allow the Mechanicum of Mars access to those serene hulks, letting the tech-priests plunder whatever they desired.

And they'd done just that, with great enthusiasm, for great profit.

The region was not haunted. No Imperial commander would ever give voice to a laughable superstition, when such words were holdovers from a more indecorous age. Yet still Colchis saw scarce traffic, and its resistance to supplying the Great Crusade remained inviolate.

It was said this defiance could only have come from Lorgar, the Emperor's Seventeenth Son, for no other authority would allow a planet to remain so curiously provincial. In the capital city, Vharadesh, a golden plaque was fixed to the immense doors leading into the Spire Temple of the Covenant. This tablet marked the

primarch's supposed words – words he'd never admitted, yet never denied, speaking to his father.

'Take me from my home, and I will sail to the stars of your empire. I will serve as a son must serve. But let Colchis stand as I have shaped it: a planet of peace and prosperity.'

It was also said, by the few that witnessed such rare moments, that the primarch smiled each time he passed those words, and reached out to stroke his golden fingertips across the etched lettering.

Colchis was hardly devoid of technology. It enjoyed the benefits of Imperial life and culture, despite its master's hesitance to supply materiel for the Emperor's war. Auspices in the sky-traffic towers of Vharadesh tracked the activity in orbit, with scanner consoles lighting up at the sudden pulse of so many signals.

It had been many years since the Urizen returned home.

This time, there was someone waiting for him.

THE SHIP BORE a proud title, named in honour of a legendary city in the murky tides of Prospero's complicated mythology. The *Sekhemra* was the only live vessel in the heavens above Colchis, and it rested in its geocentric orbit, weapons unpowered, shields inactive. The humble strike cruiser seemed content to wait in silence, bathing its red hull in the fierce illumination offered by the system's sun.

Reality opened in an uneven rent, and the Word Bearers fleet streaked across the void, great engines also streaming light into the darkness as they powered towards their home world.

On the strategium of the *Fidelitas Lex*, the Lord of the Legion watched the red ship's resolving image on the occulus. He smiled, and closed his eyes as emotion threatened to overtake him.

'Incoming hail,' a bridge officer called.

'Open channel,' Lorgar replied. The smile didn't leave his face when he opened his eyes, and the occulus projected a grainy image from the opposing vessel's command deck.

The pict revealed a giant in unprepossessing black-stained mail armour, surrounded by his own bridge crew. His skin had a dark, coppery hue, as if he spent many long days under alien suns, and his helm bore a scarlet plume of cresting hair. One eye was sealed, puckered shut from an old wound. The other glinted with a colour that couldn't be made out through the image's distortion.

'A trifle melodramatic, brother,' said the giant in an amused baritone. 'That many ships, when I only brought one.'

'You came,' Lorgar said through his smile.

'Of course I came. But you owe me some answers, dragging me across half the Imperium like this.'

'You'll have them, I promise you. It lifts my heart to see you.'

'And mine, to see you. It has been too long. But… brother,' the giant hesitated. 'There was talk of Monarchia. Is it true?'

The smile faded. 'Not now,' Lorgar said. 'Not here.'

'Very well,' said Magnus the Red. 'I'll meet you in the City of Grey Flowers.'

LIFE ALWAYS STRUGGLES in the desert.

On Colchis, as on many of the Imperium's dryest worlds, the indigenous life coped with the climate however it could. For the human population, it was a matter of coastal cities, immense water filtration facilities, irrigation farming, and dealing with the seasonal floods from the rushing rivers that acted as blood vessels for the arid plains.

Vharadesh, the Holy City, was the nexus of such industrious efforts. Swathes of irrigated farmland reached out from the city walls, a triumph of ingenuity over nature. Colchis was a thirsty world, but the perfection of the human form showed in all things.

For other forms of life, lacking the capacity to affect their own environment, adaptation and evolution went hand in hand. Many plants in the drought-wracked scrubland had leaves with a layer of fine hairs to catch and hold more moisture from the in-

frequent rainfall, and as a defence against the wind's drying touch. Colchis demanded much from its native life.

These forms of plant life had been catalogued by Imperial scholars over the years, and promptly ignored. All except for one wildflower growing in the alluvial deserts – a flower that couldn't be dismissed so readily when it meant so much to the Colchisian people.

The moon lily bloomed with leaves of silver, white and grey – all to reflect more of the sun's harsh light, stunting its own photosynthesis in the name of survival. Fragile, beautiful, the moon lily was a gift between lovers, a decoration at weddings and festivals, and those trained in its breeding and care were as respected as teachers and priests among the populace.

Across balconies throughout the city, especially on the spires claimed by the Covenant, great hanging gardens of white and silver blooms contrasted against the tan stone walls. Vharadesh was the Imperial designative name for the capital, and in the ruling caste's religious sermons, it was referred to with passion and pride as the Holy City.

But to the people of Colchis, Vharadesh would always be the City of Grey Flowers.

Its wide streets were filled with cheering crowds as the Legion returned home, and when the first Stormbird – a vulture of gold – roared in for a landing by the Spire Temple, the people flocked to see their messiah return, and the pilgrims he brought with him.

ARGEL TAL WAS approaching this carefully. He wasn't sure how she would react.

'You will have to be careful on the surface,' he said.

It had taken four months to reach Colchis from the ruin of Forty-Seven Sixteen. Four months of flight through stable warp conditions, four months of training and prayer, four months of listening to Xaphen debate about the Old Faith, and what hidden truths might be contained within the legend of the Pilgrimage. Argel Tal wasn't sure what he believed, and the alien presence of

doubt left him cold. He'd spent much of his time with Cyrene, as well as drilling the Seventh Company to battle readiness, and duelling Aquillon in the practice cages. The Custodian was a nightmare of an opponent, and both warriors enjoyed the challenge offered by the other. They weren't even close to being friends, but grudging admiration was a fine foundation for meeting each other in the duelling ring.

With the four months of travel to Colchis added to the rest, Argel Tal and the Chapter of the Serrated Sun had been absent from their own expeditionary fleet for well over half a year. From what little word reached him, apparently the 1,301st Expedition was sending repeated pleas for the Serrated Sun to return, for they were locked in a vicious compliance that required Astartes aid to break the enemy. Already one of the smaller fleets, they were apparently grinding to a halt without their Legion contingent.

One of the messages had been addressed to him personally, as Chapter subcommander. It came directly from Fleetmaster Baloc Torvus – a veteran of void war, but self-confessed at lacking insight into planetary engagements.

'We're hurling men at one of their mountain strongholds, but they hold every advantage of terrain, and our armour divisions are ground down by ambushes in the foothills. Would that you were here, subcommander.The blades of the Seventh would make brutally short work of this place.'

Argel Tal had saved it in the data-slate's memory archive as a form of penance. He sometimes brought it back up to read over, masochistic in his frustration.

Soon, though. They would return to the Great Crusade once breaking orbit from Colchis. The primarch had business here, and in truth, it was a blessing to be able to return to the home world. Argel Tal hadn't been back himself in three decades.

'I said, you will need to be careful on the surface,' he repeated.

Cyrene had changed. Gone was the emaciated wraith who wept as she left the ashen remnants of the perfect city.

'I don't understand,' she said. Her sightless eyes were closed – a habit she'd unconsciously been forming in the past few months. As she spoke, she was arranging her hair in a fashion that seemed needlessly complicated to Argel Tal. Her hands moved slowly, carefully, sensing by touch what her eyes couldn't see. He enjoyed watching her; it was something of a guilty pleasure. While nothing of attraction existed between them, he often found himself captivated by her fragile, gentle movements, as if she was forever careful about affecting the world around her. She seemed to want to leave no mark, no imprint, on anything she touched. There was no fear in her grace, no hesitation. Simply respect. Care.

The captain stood in full armour but for his helm, leaving his head bare, so the voice she heard was his own, not his helm's. Cyrene was slowly learning to differentiate his voice from Xaphen's, mostly through their accents. Argel Tal had a rough, almost impolite edge to his guttural intonation, whereas Xaphen – born in the Urals on Terra – had a clipped tendency to turn S's into Z's. The Chaplain spoke like a foreign diplomat. The captain like a ganger, or a boy living on the streets.

'What don't you understand?' he asked her.

She toyed with a lock of hair as it lay against her cheek. 'I don't understand why I have to be careful.'

This was a difficult subject. Word from the Legion fleet was constantly cycled back to Colchis, for the people of the home world took great interest, and great pride, in the conquests of their chosen champions. Mothers and fathers listened in the hope some chronicle would detail the glory of a son taken from them in childhood and reshaped as one of the Astartes. Covenant clergy listened for inspiration to preach of the primarch's righteousness.

This network was maintained by astropaths, sending short psychic pulses of information back to their counterparts on the home world. Several times a week, broadcast from speaker towers across the Holy City, updates of the Legion's progress drew

flocks of listeners. City-wide celebrations were declared by the Covenant each time a Legion expedition reached compliance.

Everyone – *everyone* – had listened to the reports of Monarchia. The Legion's humiliation. The Word Bearers kneeling. The Emperor destroying the Imperial Creed forever.

The fleet's return had an uncomfortable gravity about it, for despite the population's joy, the whole thing reeked of so much more than a simple homecoming.

And then there was the matter of Monarchia's survivors. The Legion had encountered few living souls in the ruined city, and Cyrene was one of only seven people taken from the devastation. Word of these holy refugees flashed through Colchisian society. Here were living martyrs, drawn from the ashes of the Legion's shame. The Covenant sent entreaties to the Legion fleet, pleading with the primarch to allow the refugees to set foot on Colchis, perhaps even to be inducted into the holy order itself.

The seven names were already being spoken with all the reverence of saints' titles, added into daily prayers. It was difficult to explain this, because Argel Tal had only learned the extent of the refugees' fame an hour before. The Chapter of the Osseous Throne made planetfall shortly after the primarch, and the four refugees with them were mobbed by adoring crowds. Their every word was recorded, their names were chanted in the streets, while people sought to touch their skin in the hope of gaining some of their divine fortune.

Vox-reports immediately stabbed back to the ships in orbit, warning the other Chapters harbouring refugees that the City of Grey Flowers was as eager to see the Monarchians as it was to welcome the primarch home.

'You have to be careful because there may be some people on the surface who seek your blessing, and approach you without warning. It might be disorienting.'

Her serf's robe was a simple affair, but she smoothed it carefully against her returning figure. 'I still don't understand. Why would they want to see us?'

'You are an icon,' he said. 'A living icon, a martyr in life rather than death. You paid the price for Colchisian ignorance, and in doing so, earned great respect from us all. I'm told they are saying the seven of you are tied to the Legion's destiny. A reflection of failure, a hope for the future. Your life is a lesson, and one we must all learn.'

She faced him, without seeing him. 'That's very poetic for you, captain.'

'It is the best way I can describe it.'

'I'm an icon to them?'

He donned his helm, staining his sight blue and adding a layer of targeting information to his vision. His voice emerged as vox-growl.

'Not just to them.'

THE JOURNEY DOWN to Colchis lasted twenty minutes.

In the Thunderhawk's cockpit, Argel Tal stood behind Malnor, the pilot. They came in low over the parched earth, approaching the mud-brick city walls as the desert sliced past beneath. The city's skyline showed a breathtaking view of tan buildings, brick spires as far as the eye could see. To the south, the great River Phranes flowed past – a wide road of sapphire glinting in the sunlight. River barges and bulk freight carriers crossed on the wide waters.

'Legion gunship *Rising Sun*, this is western district control. Please respond.'

Argel Tal scowled behind his faceplate. This didn't bode well.

'They're keen,' said Malnor, and reached to activate the console's voxsponder. 'This is the *Rising Sun*, inbound.'

'*Rising Sun*, please confirm you have the Blessed Lady aboard.'

'The what?' He deactivated the channel and looked over his shoulder. 'Captain?'

Argel Tal swore in breathless Colchisian. 'I think they mean—'

'This must be a joke,' Malnor muttered.

'My blood's running cold,' said Argel Tal. 'This is no joke.'

'This is the *Rising Sun*,' Malnor voxed again. 'Repeat, please.'

'*Rising Sun*, this is western district control. Please confirm you have the Blessed Lady aboard.'

'I don't know,' the sergeant grumbled. 'That depends on what you're talking about.'

The voice on the other end of the vox-channel explained, and assigned landing coordinates accordingly.

'This,' Malnor said to Argel Tal, 'is getting out of hand.'

The captain nodded. 'Be ready. You've just volunteered to join the escort detail.'

'By your word.'

THE THUNDERHAWK SHUDDERED as it graced the landing platform.

'I hear something,' Cyrene said. She stood in the gunship's loading bay, flanked by Xaphen and Torgal.

'It's the engines cycling down,' said Torgal, knowing full well it wasn't. He'd seen the view from the cockpit window as they came in on approach, and like the other Astartes, his enhanced hearing could clearly differentiate between engine whine-down and the sounds outside the hull.

'No,' she said. 'No, it's voices. I can hear voices.'

Argel Tal stood ahead of them, ready to hit the door release and lower the gang ramp. Malnor came from the cockpit, thudding his way down the crew ladder. He saluted Argel Tal as he took up position behind the Monarchian.

'You might be disoriented, Cyrene.' Argel Tal's vox-voice almost made the words a threat. 'Do not fear, you will be between the four of us at all times. Malnor behind, Torgal to the left, Xaphen to the right. I will lead the way. It is only a short journey to the monastic spire where you will be staying.'

'What's happening?' she asked. All four warriors could hear her heart beating faster now, a wet drum behind her ribcage. 'What's going on?'

'There's nothing to worry about,' said Xaphen. They were the last words he spoke before donning his own helm. *'We will be with you.'*

'But—'

'You will be fine,' Argel Tal said, and thumped the door release.

Sunlight flooded into the loading bay. As did thousands of cheering voices.

'It's going to be a long day,' said Torgal.

TORGAL'S PREDICTION PROVED correct.

Cyrene was shaken by the day's events, no doubt about it, but the Astartes believed she'd held up well. Colchis was a world of peace and law, and the City of Grey Flowers respected its holy leaders above all. On more barbarous worlds, the Monarchian refugees might have been besieged by adoring crowds in celebrations that bordered on riots, but here they were cheered from the side of roads, with the petals of moon lilies cast onto the ground before them.

Upon first leaving the gunship, Cyrene had lifted a hand to her mouth, almost staggered by the wall of sound that rose to meet her. Xaphen lightly rested his gauntlet on her shoulder in reassurance. She'd heard Argel Tal, a few steps ahead of her, swearing in a language she didn't understand.

And then they were walking.

In the bellicose good cheer, she lost the second of her senses. After growing used to perceiving the world around her by sound, to have everything washed away in the crowd's noise was a frightening loss. Several times she reached a hand out, her fingertips brushing the cold metal of Argel Tal's back-mounted power pack.

'Are they near?' she asked. The crowd sounded close, so very close.

'They won't touch you.' She thought it was Torgal's voice, but through the helm filters, she couldn't be sure. 'We are between you and the crowd, little mistress.'

Definitely Torgal. Only he called her that.

'Will they not touch your armour?' she asked. 'For good luck?'

'No. It's against tradition.' She was certain that was Xaphen, but he said nothing more.

The crowd continued to chant. Sometimes, her name. Sometimes, her title.

'How many are there?' asked Cyrene, her voice small.

'Thousands,' one of the Word Bearers said. In the clash of noise, it was difficult to tell where their voices were coming from.

'We're almost there.' That was definitely Argel Tal. She recognised his accent, despite the helm.

The captain couldn't entirely swallow his unease. It lingered, coppery and unwelcome, on the underside of his tongue. Target locks flitted from peasant to peasant as he scanned the crowd. Row upon row of celebrants, lining the street. So much for a meditative homecoming.

'Sir,' Malnor voxed. 'Oath papers?'

'Permission granted.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Malnor broke ranks, walking towards the crowd. The closest citizens knelt as he approached, and averted their eyes. Without ceremony, though with obvious care, the sergeant untied the parchment scroll bound to his right pauldron. He rolled it up into a scroll, and offered it to one of the kneeling peasants. An old man took it in hands that trembled. Whether they shook with emotion or palsy wasn't clear, but the silver wetness in his eyes was testament to his devotion.

'Thank you, great lord,' the elder said, and pressed the gift to his forehead in thanks.

Malnor had another oath paper bound to the shin of his armour. He removed this next, and offered it to a woman who quietly wept.

'Bless you,' she whispered, and touched the scroll to her forehead, just as the old man had done.

'From the fires of righteousness,' Malnor intoned, 'unto the blood of purity. We bring the Word of Lorgar.'

'By your word,' the nearby peasants chorused.

Malnor nodded his helmed head in acknowledgement, and walked back to join his brothers.

'What happened?' Cyrene asked. 'Why did we stop?'

'It's considered a blessing to be offered the oath papers from our armour,' said Argel Tal. A few minutes later, Argel Tal paused the march again to give one of his parchments to a young mother holding a baby. She pressed the scroll to her infant's forehead, then her own.

'What is your name, warrior?' she asked, needing to crane her neck to look up at him.

'Argel Tal.'

'Argel Tal,' she repeated. 'My son will carry that name from this day forward.'

Insofar as it was possible for a walking suit of battle armour to look humble, the captain did so now. 'I'm honoured,' he said, and added 'Be well,' before rejoining the march.

Torgal glanced down at the frail figure of Cyrene. 'Would you like my oath scroll, little mistress?' he offered.

'I don't read very much anymore,' she smiled, bright and sincere. 'But thank you, Torgal.'

After the short march through streets she couldn't see, Cyrene had spent the rest of the day in one of the Covenant's temples. Argel Tal and his officers remained with her as she was interviewed and questioned by overeager priests. Instead of being given a seat, she was guided to recline on a long couch, made almost princely by too many cushions. It had the opposite effect of the intended one, leaving her shuffling to get comfortable no matter how she reclined. In the end, she just sat up straight, treating it like a chair.

'What was the last thing you saw?' one priest asked.

'Describe the fire that rained from the sky,' pressed another.

'Describe the city's towers falling.'

As the questions went on, she wondered just how many inquisitors were sat before her. The room was cold, and the faint echo when people spoke suggested a large chamber. A background hum pervaded everything, a thrum that set her teeth on edge – it was one thing to recognise the active buzz of Astartes armour, but another entirely to get used to it.

'Do you hate the Emperor?' one of the priests asked.

'What happened in the months after the city fell?' asked another.

'Did you kill any of your abusers?'

'How did you escape?'

'Would you serve the Covenant as a high priestess?'

'Why did you refuse the Legion's offer of new eyes?'

The answer to this last question intrigued her interrogators a great deal. Cyrene touched her closed eyes as she replied.

'On my world, there is a belief that the eyes were windows to the soul.'

They answered her words with muttering unintended for her ears. 'How quaint,' one of them replied. 'Do you fear your soul would quit your body through hollow eye sockets? Is that it?'

'No,' said Cyrene. 'Not that.'

'Please enlighten us, Blessed Lady.'

She shifted in discomfort yet again, and still blushed each time they used the title. 'It was said that those who wore false eyes would never move beyond this life to paradise beyond. Our mortis-priests always preached that they could see the trapped souls of the lost and the damned in the false eyes of servitors.'

There was silence, for a time.

'And you believe,' one of the priests said, 'that your spirit would be sealed within your corpse if you surrendered your natural eyes?'

She shivered to hear it put like that. 'I don't know what I believe. But I will wait until they heal. There's still a chance they might.'

'Enough,' a voice boomed, edged by vox-crackle. 'You are making her uncomfortable, and I have given my word to the Urizen that she will be taken to the Spire Temple at midnight.'

'But there's still time for—'

'With respect: be silent, priest,' Argel Tal stepped closer to her, and she felt her gums itching at the drone of his armour. 'Come, Cyrene. The primarch awaits.'

'May the Blessed Lady return tomorrow?' one priest piped up as they were leaving.

None of the Astartes answered.

Once outside, another crowd was waiting for her. She smiled in the direction of the noise, and offered the occasional wave, feeling her face burn with self-conscious doubt. First and foremost in her mind was the effort to keep her discomfort from showing. There would be no getting used to this. She knew she'd hate it until it either stopped of its own accord, or they left Colchis behind.

'We didn't have to leave,' she said. 'I could have answered more questions. Was I supposed to?'

Over the din of the crowd, she heard Argel Tal reply.

'My apologies for using you as an excuse to leave,' he said, 'but it was too pointless to endure any longer. Questions that led nowhere, or were already answered in the Legion's reports. Tedious bureaucracy, propagated by self-important men.'

'Is that not blasphemy? Defying the will of the Covenant?'

'No,' said the captain. 'It was a tactical retreat in the face of overwhelming boredom.'

She smiled at that, as the Word Bearers led her on.

Less than three minutes later, as Cyrene was drawing breath to comment on the warmth of the desert night's wind, there was a crashing sound from above, the crash of a hundred windows smashing at once.

What she couldn't see was all four of her warrior guides standing utterly still, staring up at the Spire Temple – that twisting tower of tanned stone, central in the city, taller than all else.

Around her, the crowd's cheers soured into whispers and weeping. Two of the Astartes, she didn't know which, began to chant prayers in monotone vox-voices, benedictions to the primarch.

'What happened?' she asked.

'Move,' Xaphen ordered. One of them gripped her elbow and forced her into a run. Their armour joints snarled with the change of pace.

'What's going on?' she tried again. 'What was that noise? An explosion?'

'The primarch's observatory on top of the central spire,' he said. 'Something is wrong.'

TEN

The Right to Lead a Legion
Empyrean
Misery

AN HOUR BEFORE, Lorgar was leaning on the balcony's railing, looking out over the city. The Spire Temple of the Covenant offered an unparalleled view of Vharadesh, and the primarch inhaled the scent of spice, flowers and sand as he watched the sun setting behind the horizon.

Magnus stood alongside him, still clad in the coat of black mail, his coppery skin burnished by occasional sweat trickles. Of the two brothers, Magnus was taller, and even in the years before losing his eye, he'd scarcely resembled their Imperial father. Lorgar was the image of the Emperor in an unknowable younger life – an immortal at thirty.

'You have done great things here,' Magnus said, also staring over the vista of Vharadesh. The spiralling towers, bedecked in sloping walkways, like twisted horns… The sea of red-walled homes… The great parks of moon lilies growing in unforgiving soil, ready to be spread over roads and balconies across the city…

'I have seen Tizca,' Lorgar's smile was sincere, 'and I am always honoured you can leave your City of Light, yet still praise my people's work here.'

Magnus chuckled, avalanche-low. 'To think such beauty could rise from riverside sand and bricks of compacted mud. The City of Grey Flowers is a haven for me, Lorgar. You have melded technology and antiquity with consummate skill. It puts me in

mind of those first cities ever raised by mankind, in the deserts they were forced to call home.'

Lorgar laughed, shaking his head. 'I've seen no such images in scrolls, brother.'

'Nor have I,' the one-eyed king smiled. 'But in dreams. Meditations. In traversing the waves and depths of the Great Ocean.'

Lorgar's smile fell a notch. Where his brothers were concerned, Magnus was highest in his affections, not only because he was the first of the family Lorgar had met, but because he was one of the few the Word Bearers lord could relate to. The others were, by varying degrees, feral simpletons, cold-hearted instruments of warfare, or vainglorious warlords.

Except for Horus, of course. It was impossible to hate Horus.

He loved Magnus as one of the few he could speak with, but he never believed himself his brother's equal. Magnus's psychic gifts were unrivalled – they'd often spoken of the things Magnus witnessed in his spiritual travels through the infinite. The past. The future. The hearts and minds of men.

'Cairus,' Magnus said, his voice softer now. 'Alixandron. Babalun, most of all, for it possessed a great garden of hanging flowers akin to the one your city wears like a crown of silver blooms.'

Lorgar felt warmed by the image. The beauties of the past, rising again through human inspiration.

'As I've told you before,' he said, 'it's not my city. I had a hand in it, but I am not solely responsible for the wonders we see here.'

'Always, this modesty.' Magnus's tone had the slightest edge of disapproval, perhaps hinting at a lecture soon to come. 'You live your life for others, Lorgar. There is a line when selflessness becomes unhealthy. If all you do is to raise others from ignorance, when is there time for you to learn more yourself? If all you seek is a greater purpose in existence, where is the joy in your own life? Look to the future, but cherish the present.'

He nodded to his brother's words, watching the sun set. Even as it darkened in the horizon's clutch, it was still bright enough

to pain mortal eyes. Lorgar was untroubled by such human concerns.

'Another parade,' he said, watching a distant street filled with revellers.

'You sound melancholic,' Magnus observed. 'Your people are pleased you have come home, brother. Doesn't that lift your spirits?'

'In truth, it does. But that's not a parade in my honour. It is for the refugees of Monarchia. I asked for the seven of them to be brought here after sunset. Judging by the crowd's size, I would guess that's the parade in honour of the Blessed Lady.'

Magnus leaned his huge hands on the balcony railing, as if leaning forward would bring the distant street into sharper focus.

'Why is one of your refugees treasured above the others?'

'It is the way of things,' Lorgar inclined his head in the parade's direction. 'She is the only female, and I am told she possesses great beauty. Couple that with the fact she was the only one to actually witness Monarchia's destruction. The orbital barrage blinded her. Such sacrifice appeals to the masses.'

Magnus's patrician features hardened. 'I hear Kor Phaeron's calculations in your voice, brother. I have cautioned you before on heeding his words too closely, and too often. Bitterness burns within him.'

Lorgar shook his head. 'He worries he isn't worthy, that's all. But you're wrong – these refugees are nothing to do with Kor Phaeron, though I confess the Covenant dearly hungers to capitalise on their popularity. I requested their presence here tonight, for I wished to meet them. No more, no less.'

Magnus was appeased. Silence stretched out between them. As with all close brothers, it was a comfortable quiet, as meaningful and worthy as the words they shared.

Only one matter remained raw.

'How did it come to this?' Magnus eventually asked. 'I know of Colchis's religious wars. I remember the day I arrived with Fa-

ther, and you offered him a world devoted in worship. But we have fallen so far, and so fast. How did it come to this?'

Lorgar didn't meet his brother's eye. He continued to look down upon the city.

'This whole world burned under a crusade I led almost two centuries ago. I dreamed of god's arrival. I suffered hallucinations, visions, nightmares and trances. Night after night after night. Sometimes, I would wake at dawn to find blood running from my eyes and ears, and our father's face burned into my mind. Of course, I was too young, too naive, to realise what I was. How could I know what psychic power boiled within me, seeking a release? I was not you, to know from birth how to control my sixth sense. I am not Russ, to be able to howl and have every wolf in the world howl with me. My powers always fired in fits and bursts, coming in feasts or famines. I was eight years old when I realised that some people had pleasant dreams instead of endless nightmares. Nothing could have shocked me more.'

Magnus remained silent. Despite all their talks, all their closeness, this was a tale he'd not heard from his brother's lips before.

Lorgar closed his eyes and continued.

'I waged a holy war in the name of a father who finally descended from above, saw the oceans of blood and tears shed in his name, and simply didn't care. I wasted my youth hunched over scripture and religious codices, planning for the messiah's coming, believing he would give meaning to all human life – meaning that thousands of human cultures are forever seeking. And I was wrong.'

'The Emperor brought meaning,' said Magnus. 'Just not the meaning you hoped for.'

'He brought as many questions as he did answers. Father is hollowed through, infested by secrets. I hate that about him. He is a creature incapable of trust.'

Another pause reached out between them.

At last, Lorgar smiled, bleak and unamused. 'Perhaps he did bring meaning. But he did not bring the meaning humanity needs. That's what matters.'

'Go on,' Magnus said. 'Finish the thought.'

'Since then I have crusaded across his empire for over a century, raising icons and faiths in his image – and only *now* he objects? After a hundred years, only *now* am I told that all I've done is wrong?'

Magnus kept his silence. The doubt he felt shone through his narrowed eye.

'Magnus,' Lorgar smiled as he saw the emotion on his brother's face, 'only the truly divine deny their divinity. It's written thus in countless human cultures. He never denied his godhood when he first came to Colchis to take me into the stars. You were there. He witnessed weeks of celebrations in his honour, never once rebuking me for lauding him as a god. And since then? He has watched me crusade for him, never saying a word about what I've done. Only now, at Monarchia, did he bring down his wrath. When he decided my faith had to be broken, *after more than a century.*'

'Faith is an ugly word,' Magnus said, idly stroking the bound spine of the great book he always carried chained at his hip.

'Why were we born to be warriors?' Lorgar asked, apropos of nothing.

'Finally,' Magnus laughed, 'we reach the reason you summoned me to Colchis. Why are we warriors? A fine question, with a simple answer. We are warriors because that is what the Emperor, beloved by all, required in the galaxy's reclamation.'

'Of course. But this is the greatest age in mankind's history, and instead of philosophers and visionaries… it is led by warriors. There's something poisonous in that, Magnus. Something rotten. It is not right.'

Magnus shrugged, with a whisper of fine mail. 'Father is the visionary. He needed generals at his side.'

Lorgar clenched his teeth. 'By the Throne, I am sick to my core of hearing those words. I am *not* a soldier. I have no wish to be

one. I am not a destroyer, Magnus. Not like the others. Why do you think I spend so long establishing compliance and creating perfect worlds? In creation, I am vindicated. In destruction, I am—'

'Not a soldier?'

'Not a soldier,' Lorgar nodded. He looked exhausted. 'There are greater things in life than excelling at shedding blood.'

'If you are not a soldier, then you have no right to lead a Legion,' said Magnus. 'The Astartes are weapons, brother. Not craftsmen or architects. They are the fires that raze cities, not the hands that raise them.'

'So we are speaking in hypocrisies today?' Lorgar managed a smile. 'Your Thousand Sons are responsible for much of Tizca's beauty, let alone Prospero's enlightenment.'

'True,' Magnus returned the smile, altogether more sincere, 'and they are also responsible for a great number of faultless compliances. The Word Bearers, by comparison, are not.'

Lorgar fell silent.

'Is this about Monarchia?' Magnus asked.

'Everything is about Monarchia,' Lorgar admitted. 'It all changed in that moment, brother. The way I see the worlds we conquer. My hopes for the future. Everything.'

'I can imagine.'

'Do not patronise me,' Lorgar snapped. 'With the greatest respect, Magnus, you cannot imagine this. Did the lord of all human life descended upon you, burn your greatest achievements to ash and dust, and then tell you that you – and you alone – were a failure? Did he throw your precious Thousand Sons to the ground and tell your entire Legion that every soul wearing their armour was a wasted life?'

'Lorgar—'

'What? *What?* I spent decades on Colchis dreaming of the day god himself would arrive and lead humanity to the empyrean. I raised a religion in his honour. For over a hundred years, I have spread that faith in his name, believing he matched every dream, every prophecy, every mythic poem about the ascension of the

human race. *Now* I am told my life was a lie; that I have ruined countless civilisations with false faith; that every one of my brothers who laughed at me for seeking a greater purpose in life was *right to laugh* at our bloodline's only fool.'

'Brother, calm yourself—'

'No!' Lorgar instinctively reached for a crozius that wasn't there. His fingers curled in a rage that couldn't be released. 'No… Do not "brother" me with indulgence in your eyes. You are the wisest of us all and you see nothing of the truth in this.'

'Then explain it. And shackle your temper, I have no desire to be whined at. Or will you strike me, as you struck Guilliman?'

Lorgar hesitated. After a moment, he brushed a white petal from the railing with his golden palm. Anger quietened, without fully fading, as the petal flitted down through the air. He met Magnus's gaze.

'Forgive me. My choler is kindled, and my control lacking. You're right.'

'I always am,' Magnus smiled. 'It's a habit.'

Lorgar looked back out over the city. 'As for Guilliman… You have no idea how fine it felt to strike him down. His arrogance is unbelievable.'

'We are blessed with many brothers who would benefit from being humbled once in a while,' Magnus smiled, 'but that is for another time. Speak what must be spoken. You are afraid.'

'I am,' Lorgar confessed. 'I fear the Emperor will break the Word Bearers – and break me. We would be cast alongside the brothers we no longer speak of.'

The silence was hardly comforting. 'Well?' Lorgar asked.

'He might,' the one-eyed giant said. 'There was talk of it, before Monarchia.'

'Did he come to you to ask your thoughts?'

'He did,' Magnus admitted.

'And he went to our brothers?'

'I believe so. Don't ask what sides were taken by whom, for I do not know where most of them stood. Russ was with you, as was

Horus. In fact, it was the first time the Wolf King and I have agreed on anything of import.'

'Leman Russ spoke in my favour?' Lorgar laughed. 'Truly, we live in an age of marvels.'

Magnus didn't share the amusement. His lone eye was a deep, arctic blue as it fixed upon Lorgar. 'He did. The Space Wolves are a spiritual Legion, in their own stunted and blind way. Fenris is an unmerciful cradle, and it breeds such things in them. Russ knows that, though he lacks the intelligence to give it voice. Instead, he swore that he'd already lost two brothers, and had no desire to lose a third.'

'Two already lost.' Lorgar looked back to the city. 'I still recall how they—'

'Enough,' warned Magnus. 'Honour the oath you took that day.'

'You all find it so easy to forget the past. None of you ever wish to speak of what was lost. But could you do it again?' Lorgar met his brother's eyes. 'Could you stand with Horus or Fulgrim, and never again speak my name purely because of a promise?'

Magnus wouldn't be drawn into this. 'The Word Bearers will not walk the same paths as the forgotten and the purged. I trust you, Lorgar. Already, there's talk that compliance was achieved on Forty-Seven Sixteen with laudable speed. Settler fleets are en route, are they not?'

Lorgar ignored the rhetorical question.

'I need your guidance, Magnus. I need to see the things you see.' The gold-skinned primarch watched the procession weaving through the streets, marching closer by the minute.

'You know of Colchisian mythology, and the Pilgrimage to where gods and mortals meet. You know how it matches the beliefs of so many other worlds. The empyrean. The Primordial Truth. Heaven. Ten thousand names in ten thousand cultures. It cannot be mere superstition, if shamans and sorcerers on so many words all share the same beliefs. Perhaps father is wrong. Perhaps the stars hide more secrets. Perhaps they truly do hide the gods themselves.'

'Lorgar…' Magnus warned again. He turned from the balcony, and moved back into the expansive chamber atop the Spire Temple. The domed ceiling was glass, offering a breathtaking view of the sky as night fell. The stars were beginning to make themselves known, pinpricks of light in the sapphire sky.

'Do not hunt for something to worship,' Magnus said, 'merely because your faith was proven false.'

Lorgar followed his brother, slender fingers toying with the hem of his grey robe's sleeve. The Word Bearers primarch spent much of his time on Colchis in this spire-top observatory, staring up at the stars. It was here that he'd watched and waited for the Emperor's arrival so many decades ago, mistaken in the belief that he would be a god worthy of worship.

'Is that how you see me?' he asked Magnus, his voice softer than before. Hurt shone in his eyes, flecked with buried anger. 'Is that how you judge my actions? That I cast about in ignorance, desperate for something, anything, to hear my prayers?'

Magnus watched the stars coming out for the night. He noted several constellations already – their shapes taken and bestowed on Chapters within the Word Bearers Legion. There, the faint image of a crozius crowned with a skull; there, the high seat, adopted as the symbol of the Osseous Throne; and there, the flared circle of the serrated sun.

'That is how history will judge you,' said Magnus, 'if you remain devoted to this path. No one will see your desire to elevate humanity or raise the species into some unknown enlightenment. They will see you humiliated and weak, desperate for something to believe in.'

'Humanity is nothing without faith,' Lorgar whispered.

'And yet we do not need religion to explain the universe. The Emperor's light illuminates all.'

'That is what you always fail to see,' Lorgar moved over to a table with several crystal wine glasses. 'You think faith is about fear. About needing things explained to ignorant minds. Faith is the greatest unifying element in mankind's history. Faith was all

that kept the light of hope burning through the millennia on the thousands of worlds we now reclaim in this Crusade.'

'So you say, brother.' Magnus shrugged. 'You will not be judged kindly for that belief.'

Lorgar poured a glass of dark wine, its scent heightened by the powdered spices added during its fermentation. Lacking the climate for grape vineyards, Colchisian wine was almost always made from dates. The bitter drink reddened his lips as he sipped it.

'We are immortal,' Lorgar pointed out. 'Why would we worry for the future when we will still be around to shape it?'

Magnus ventured no answer.

'You've seen something,' Lorgar pressed. 'Something in the Great Ocean. Something in the warp you stare into so often. Some… some hint at what might be. A future yet to come?'

'It doesn't work that way, brother.'

'You're lying. You are lying to me.'

Magnus turned his gaze from the darkening sky. 'Sometimes you see and hear only what you wish. You're wrong, Lorgar. Father is not a god. There *are* no gods.'

At last, Lorgar smiled as if he'd waited hours for those words to be spoken.

'Is he a magical sky-spirit dwelling inside a mythical paradise? No. I am not a fool. He is not a god as primitive cultures once understood the concept. But the Emperor is a god in all but name, Magnus. He is psychic power incarnated within a physical shell. When he speaks, his lips never move and his throat makes no sound. His face is a thousand visages at once. The only aspect of humanity he possesses is the facade he wears to interact with mortals.'

'That's a very melodramatic perception.'

'And it is true. The only difference between you and I is that you call him father, and I call him a god.'

Magnus sighed, his breath rumbling as he suppressed a growl. 'I see where you are leading with this. Now I see why you summoned me. And Lorgar… I am leaving.'

Lorgar offered a golden hand, reaching out to his brother. 'Please, Magnus. If the Emperor is what he is, there might be other beings that wield the same power. How can so many legends of divinity, from so many disparate cultures, all agree on other powers that exist beyond the veil? There must be gods in the universe. Our species' most natural instincts cannot be wrong.'

'This reeks of desperation,' Magnus sighed. 'Have you considered that father warned you for a reason?'

'There is no shame in seeking the truth, Magnus. You of all souls should know that. Have you seen nothing of this in your travels through the Great Ocean? No beings that a human civilisation could perceive as a god or daemon?'

Magnus did not reply. His gaze burned into his brother.

'My mind is alive with questions,' the Word Bearer lord confessed. 'Where in the galaxy would gods and mortals meet?'

The giant's lip curled. 'The Great Ocean hides much beneath its tides, Lorgar. We have both walked worlds where the warp bleeds into our reality, only to be manipulated by heathen rite-masters and misinterpreted as "magic". Would you deceive yourself as they do?'

'Stay,' Lorgar implored. *'Help me.'*

Magnus shook his head. 'Help you stare into the abyss? You want me to guide you along the paths walked by primitives and barbarians?'

Lorgar drew a shaky breath before replying.

'Help me seek the truth that lies behind the stars. What if we are waging a false crusade? This might be an unholy war… World after world is purged or brought to compliance… We might be strangling the truth – a truth believed in one form or another by countless cultures… We… We… I hear something call out to me, day and night. Something in the void. Is it fate? Is this how we perceive the future? By hearing destiny's voice whisper our names?'

Lorgar fell silent as Magnus came to him, the larger brother gripping the other's robed shoulders. The golden primarch's lips were trembling. His fingers twitched and shook.

'My brother, you are raving,' said Magnus. 'Look at me. Peace, Lorgar. Peace. Look at me.'

Lorgar did as he was asked. Magnus the Red, the Crimson King, fixed his brother's gaze with his own remaining eye.

'Your eye has changed colour,' Lorgar murmured. 'I hear them calling, Magnus. Fate. Destiny. I hear destiny's thousand voices…'

'Focus on me,' Magnus intoned, speaking slow and soft. 'Listen well to my words. You are speaking from fear. A fear of failing again. A fear of dooming another world to destruction. A fear that father will order a third Legion, and a third son, to be purged from history.'

'The fear has faded. I am no longer afraid. I am inspired.'

'You cannot hide it from me with mere words, brother. And you are right to fear what may come to pass. You stand on the precipice of destruction, and still contemplate a path that will send you falling over the edge. I understand your pain. Everything you achieved on Colchis was for a flawed faith. Every compliant world is one your Legion must revisit and reshape. But you cannot live in fear of making another mistake.'

Lorgar said nothing for several moments. At last, his shoulders slumped.

'You could have helped me, Magnus.' The Word Bearers' primarch lifted his brother's hands away, and walked back to the wine table. 'We could have taken the Pilgrimage together, and sought the place where the stars are stained by divine influence. You see into the Great Ocean better than anyone else. You could have been my navigator.'

Magnus narrowed his good eye. In sympathy, the puckered scar marking the absence of his other eye pulled tight.

'What do you intend to do, Lorgar? You have no idea of what you seek.'

'I will continue the Great Crusade,' Lorgar smiled, taking another swallow of the dark wine. 'I will cast my fleet across the galaxy, and bring every world we find into compliance. And as we sail the heavens, we will be as pilgrims seeking a holy land. If there is truth behind the legends so many cultures share, then I will find it. And with it, I will enlighten humanity.'

Magnus said nothing. Disbelief robbed him of speech.

Lorgar drained the wine. It stained his golden lips again. 'I will apply my Legion's full strength to the Great Crusade, and never raise another monument in the Emperor's image. I will do it all under the watchful eyes of his Custodes war dogs. Surely there is no harm in recording ancient tales of faiths from the cultures we encounter? You yourself assured me they were all false. Father said the same.'

'I am leaving,' Magnus said again, and moved to the centre of the room. Resting his gloved hand on the great leather-bound book chained to his belt, the primarch looked back at his brother. They would not meet again for almost forty years, and the galaxy would be a very different place by the time they did.

They both sensed this. It carried between them in that lingering stare: half-challenge, half-plea.

'What swims within the Great Ocean that you've always kept from us?' Lorgar demanded, teeth clenching. 'What secrets hide within the warp? Why do you spend your life staring into it, if there's nothing there? What if I asked our father about your secret travels into the aether?'

'Farewell, Lorgar.'

The Word Bearers lord pulled back his hood, his handsome features rendered into true gold by the candlelight.

'Is there a place where reality and unreality converge? An empyrean, a heaven that humanity has always misunderstood? A realm where gods and mortals meet? *Answer me*, Magnus.'

Magnus shook his head as motes of misty light began to form around him. A teleportation lock from his vessel in orbit. Wind, from nowhere, began to breathe.

'What are the voices?' Lorgar screamed over the rising winds. *'Who calls to me?'*

'If you will not alter your path, then only one thing awaits you in the stars,' said Magnus.

Lorgar stared in rapt silence, hungering for the answer, but Magnus spoke only a single word before vanishing in a burst of bright light and white noise.

'Misery.'

ELEVEN

In a God's Service
Confession
The Pilgrimage

FOR SEVERAL KILOMETRES around the Spire Temple, revellers in the streets looked up in horror as the tower-top exploded in searing light. A dusty powder rained down from the observatory – its glass dome pulverised to the tiniest, twinkling shards.

The sonic boom of teleportation faded, as did the rush of displaced air.

In the wake of Magnus's thunderous departure, Lorgar stood unfazed. His robe fluttered in the evening wind, and he spared a moment's consideration for his scripture scrolls and parchment notes blowing out into the city. His crystal glasses were as annihilated as the reinforced glass dome, and his writing desk was stained by an expanding pool of bitter wine.

After an unknowable time of staring down at Vharadesh, he became aware of a pounding on the iron door set in the only remaining wall. Distracted, he paid the sound only a little heed.

'Enter,' he said.

ASCENDING THE SPIRE temple had been an exercise in frustration, with Covenant priests frantic about both the Blessed Lady's presence and the explosion almost ten minutes before, in the master's observatory. On several occasions, the Word Bearers had threatened panicking clergymen, forcing them aside to clear the way.

'He will not open the doors!' one wailed with a flagellant's desperation.

'We will speak with the primarch,' Xaphen assured the Covenant ministers. 'He sent for the Blessed Lady, and our lord will open the door for us.'

'What if he is wounded?' one of them whined, an obese creature with shaking jowls in the layered white and grey robes of a deacon. 'We must attend to the Urizen!'

'Control your emotions, and move aside,' Argel Tal growled, 'or I will kill you.'

'You cannot mean that, lord!'

Faster than human eyes could follow, the swords of red iron came free in hissing rasps. The tips of both blades rested against the fat priest's three chins before he'd even had time to blink. Apparently, the lord did mean it.

'Yes,' the deacon stammered. 'Yes, I…'

'Just move,' Argel Tal suggested. The priest took the suggestion, trying not to burst into tears. As he moved, an animal scent tainted the air; stronger than the fear-sweat and sour breath from the priests around them.

'Sir,' Torgal switched to vox, rather than speaking aloud. 'The priest pissed in his robes.'

Argel Tal grunted, and lifted Cyrene over the warm puddle on the wooden stairs.

With the last of the clergy sent scurrying, the warriors ascended the wide, spiralling stairway with their ward guarded between them.

'ENTER,' THE VOICE called.

Argel Tal hadn't sheathed his swords. He led the group into the primarch's observatory, which was now little more than a stone platform exposed to the night's breeze. Scrolls and books lay scattered across the floor, the former gently nudged by the wind, the latter having their pages turned by it.

The primarch stood by the platform's edge, staring down at the city below. His shaven, tattooed head was bare, seemingly un-

marked by injury, and the grey-white robe of Covenant hierarchs was free of bloodstains.

'Sire?' said Argel Tal. 'What happened here?'

Lorgar turned slowly. Faint confusion marred his features, as if he'd expected someone else.

'Argel Tal,' he said, his voice rumbling. 'Captain of the Seventh Assault Company, Subcommander of the Chapter of the Serrated Sun.'

'Yes, lord. It is I.'

'Greetings, my son.'

The captain fought to keep the unease from his voice as he replied. 'Sire, the vox-network is aflame. May I inform the Legion that all is well?'

'Why would all not be well?' the primarch asked, his face still unresolved from distracted confusion.

'The explosion, sire,' said Argel Tal. 'Nine minutes ago.' He gestured around. 'The dome,' he added lamely.

'Ah,' Lorgar smiled. It was a magnanimous and entertained smile, crooked as if sharing a joke. 'I will have to discuss the matter of teleportation inside sensitive structures with my beloved brother in the future. Captain, do you intend to murder me?'

Argel Tal lowered his blades, only then realising he held them *en garde*.

'Forgive me, sire.'

Lorgar laughed, the feyness dissipating completely. 'Please inform the Legion I am well, and apologise for my lack of contact. I was quite lost in thought.'

On shrieking engines, two gunships drifted out of the night, hovering close to the tower-top. Their engine wash sent the remaining scrolls scattering off the edges, and spotlights stabbed down to illuminate the primarch with Argel Tal's coterie.

Argel Tal blinked at a flashing icon on his retinal display. 'This is the Seventh Captain. Stand down, stand down. False alarm.'

The tower-top fell dark as the stab-lights cut out.

'By your word,' one of the pilots said. 'Disengaging.'

Lorgar watched the gunships cruise away, back to their landing pads on the city's outskirts. All sky-freight – most notably the Legion's own military outposts – were situated in the desert outside the city walls. Vharadesh would not be defiled by warfare. Never again. Not after the civil war that crushed the Old Ways and brought the planet under Lorgar's rule so long ago.

'My lord,' Argel Tal ventured. 'You requested the presence of Cyrene, the Monarchian.'

Lorgar seemed to notice the others for the first time. A warm smile lit his features, and he stepped closer.

'I was just musing, captain, on whether I have thanked you yet.'

Argel Tal sheathed his blades and removed his helm. The warm air felt good on his face and sweating neck.

'Thanked me, lord?'

'Yes,' the primarch nodded. 'Were you and your Chaplain not the two who lifted me from the perfect city's dust, and set me on my feet once more?'

'Yes, lord. That was us. With respect, we didn't expect you to recall it.'

'Kor Phaeron professed not to remember your names. The old man has a black sense of humour. But I recall the moment all too well, and I thank you for it. I will arrange for my gratitude to be shown in a more significant way soon.'

'No, sire…' said Xaphen.

'That's not necessary, lord…' said Argel Tal.

Lorgar raised a hand to stall their protests. 'Ah, ah. Enough of that foolish modesty. Now, this must be the Blessed Lady. Come forward, child.'

Torgal and Malnor, who'd been kneeling in their lord's presence, rose to their feet and guided Cyrene closer.

In the presence of a primarch, most mortals were gripped by the immensity of just what they were seeing. Here, in physical form, stood majesty incarnate. The biological manipulation, flesh-smithing and genetic rewriting that goes into the construction of one of the Emperor's sons was a unique and unrepeatable practice, with its roots hidden beneath layers of ubelievable se-

crecy, for even if another sentient being could glimpse the Emperor's gestation laboratories, they would never understand what transpired within. Every mote of biological matter in their bodies was painstakingly shaped – forged on the quantum level to contribute to the whole. It was beyond science, beyond alchemy, beyond psychic sorcery, and yet drew from all of these and more.

Humans had suffered strokes and heart attacks in the presence of primarchs. Almost all, without exception, abased themselves upon first meeting one. Many wept without intention or reason.

Cyrene stood where she was led to stand, and she smiled at Lorgar. Directly at him – directly at his face.

'Hello, Blessed Lady,' the god's son chuckled. She was just tall enough to reach his waist.

'I… I can see you,' she almost laughed. 'I can see your smile.'

Lorgar saw his warriors begin to come closer, ready to examine her, to see if her sight was returning. He gestured them back with a hand, and shook his head.

+Argel Tal+ The primarch's voice was sibilant in the captain's mind. Despite the gene-link between them, it was unpleasantly invasive – a spike of cold cutting right to the brain. The captain felt his muscles bunch, and both hearts beat faster.

The Word Bearer nodded, hoping his liege didn't detect his discomfort, but knowing he almost definitely did.

+It is said she was abused on Khur+ came the primarch's voice.

The Word Bearer nodded again.

+What a creature is Man+, Lorgar's silent voice seemed to sigh. +So much of life is wasted seeking dominance over all around us.+

Emboldened by his father's familiarity tonight, Argel Tal tapped two fingertips beneath his eyes, one after the other.

+No+ Lorgar's silent voice was weighted by emotion. +She cannot see me. She senses me, my aura, and her mind misinterprets it as sight. But her eyes are still dead. They will always be. Guilliman's incendiary rage blinded her forever.+

All of this transpired in three beats of Argel Tal's twinned hearts. Lorgar hadn't even glanced in his direction.

'Yes,' the primarch said to Cyrene, and lowered himself to one knee. It brought his face almost level with hers. Her sightless gaze followed his movements, and he smiled to see the effect he had on her. 'Yes,' he said again. 'You can see me.'

'As bright as the sun,' Cyrene whispered, crying now. 'I see gold, and gold, and gold.'

A hand the size of her head touched her with a ghost's softness, thick fingertips brushing her cheeks, drying her tears. She breathed out a sigh without meaning to, somewhere between a sob and a laugh.

'Cyrene,' Lorgar's voice was resonant and low in her ears. 'I am told you are something of a talisman to my warriors. A lucky charm, if you will.'

'I couldn't say, my lord.'

'I am not your lord,' Lorgar gently stroked her features, fingertips smoothing along her nose, her cheekbones, her jawline. It was as if he were the blind one, needing to touch her to imagine her features. 'Your life is your own, not mine – not anyone's – to claim.'

She nodded, unable to speak through the mask of tears shining on her face.

'Do you know why I wished to see you, Cyrene?'

'No,' her voice was strengthless and breathless. She merely mouthed the word.

'To ask you for something. A gift only you can give.'

'Anything,' she mouthed. 'Anything.'

'Will you grant me forgiveness?' the primarch asked. He took her tiny hands in his own, the golden fingers enveloping hers completely. 'Will you forgive what I did to your world, to your perfect city, to your precious eyes?'

She managed a nod, looking away from the golden light she thought she could see.

Lorgar kissed her knuckles, the barest touch of his lips against her skin. 'Thank you, Blessed Lady. My soul is lighter in the wake of your words.'

He released her hands, and rose to his feet, moving away.

'Wait,' she called out. 'Let me serve you. Let me serve your Legion. Please.'

Argel Tal repressed a shiver. Cyrene's words were achingly similar to the vow he'd made himself upon first seeing the primarch. How curious it was, when the past reached through to the present with such clarity.

'Do you know,' Lorgar asked her, 'what a confessor is? Did they have such positions on Khur?'

'They did, master,' Cyrene said. She'd still not recovered her voice. 'They called themselves the Listeners. They would hear our sins, and forgive them.'

'Exactly,' Lorgar chuckled. 'Your life is your own, Cyrene Valantion of Monarchia. But if you wish to walk with my warriors and journey through the stars, then there is the perfect role for you to fill. You have heard my sins, and forgiven me. Would you do the same for my sons?'

Her answer was to kneel, abasing herself in thankful prayer. Instead of replying, her whispering voice spoke invocations of piety, straight from the scriptures she studied as a child.

The primarch cast a last affectionate look at Cyrene, before turning to Argel Tal. 'Captain,' he said.

'My lord.' Argel Tal saluted, fist over his chestplate.

'Erebus had much to say about you in the month I was secluded. When I recalled who pulled me up from my knees before my brother Guilliman, Erebus spoke of you.'

'I… am surprised to hear that, lord.'

Lorgar wasn't deaf to the hesitance in Argel Tal's tone. 'I had assumed your discomfort with Erebus had faded with time. Have I erred in that belief?'

Argel Tal shook his head. 'No, lord. Forgive me a moment's distraction. Our difficulties are in the past. The trials were long ago.'

'That's good to hear,' Lorgar chuckled. 'To be trained by Erebus himself, and choose the blade above the crozius. You walking another path is a great blow to his pride, and a disappointment that cut him to his core. But he has forgiven you. I wondered – could the same be said for you? Have you forgiven him?'

Choosing another path. That, Argel Tal thought, was putting it very delicately.

'There was nothing to forgive,' he said. 'His anger at my decision was understandable.'

Lorgar watched him closely, the primarch's grey eyes forever judging, despite the affection that lay within them.

'Your compassion has always done you great justice, Argel Tal.'

'I am honoured you believe so, sire.'

'So now we come to the crux of why you were summoned.'

'I stand ready.'

'There will be some changes to the Serrated Sun when you return to the Great Crusade. I have chosen four Chapters to play host to our Custodes sentinels – each Chapter dealing with five of the twenty. It is with regret that I inform you the Serrated Sun is one of them. I understand you met Aquillon in the city of glass? I have granted his request that one of the Custodes groups travel with the Serrated Sun. I saw no harm in throwing the Emperor's watchdogs this one bone.'

'By your word,' said Argel Tal.

'There's more, I'm afraid.' Lorgar smiled again, every inch the charming, golden hierarch who led a revolution on this very world. 'I trust you above and beyond the call of duty. You lifted me from shame, dragging me from the dust, and I thank you for it. So I would ask, in all humility, if you would grant me a favour, Seventh Captain Argel Tal.'

The words, and the tone in which they were spoken, drove Argel Tal to his knee in supplication. What other primarch – what other godlike being – would be so humble as to ask one of his own sons for the gift of a favour? It humbled Argel Tal to be born into this being's bloodline.

Lorgar laughed, the sound melodious in the night's faint breeze. A dozen metres away, Cyrene heard the sound and felt the threat of tears again.

'Rise,' Lorgar said through the smile. 'Have you not knelt enough, Argel Tal?'

He rose, but kept his eyes at the primarch's feet. 'Ask anything of me, sire. Anything, and it will be done.'

'I have travelled with thousands upon thousands of my warriors, decade after decade, acting the general, playing the admiral. I grow weary of such games. While the Legion scatters across the stars, I have no wish to cross paths with my brothers now. Their righteous indignation will grate on my last nerves. You could say I wish to hide, but that would be a lie. I simply wish not to be found. There's a beautifully subtle difference between the two.'

'I understand, lord.'

'Tell me: your expeditionary fleet – which was it, again?'

'The 1,301st, sire. Commanded by Fleetmaster Baloc Torvus, currently engaged in the Atlas subsector.' *And awaiting reinforcement,* he didn't add out loud.

'Yes,' Lorgar nodded. 'The 1,301st. I have journeyed with eighteen of my Chapters since the dawn of the Great Crusade. This time, as we face our uncertain future, I would ask your permission to travel with the three hundred warriors of the Serrated Sun.'

Argel Tal looked over his shoulder at Cyrene, then Xaphen, before turning back to Lorgar. The Chaplain nodded once. The confessor had her hands over her mouth as tears streamed down her face.

'Pardon me, sire?' Argel Tal asked. 'I am not sure I heard you correctly.'

'I am asking this favour of you, my son. Kor Phaeron will lead the 47th Expedition in my absence. I may not be able to outrun the Occuli Imperator – he will follow me wherever I go – but I can seek the empyrean far from my brothers' eyes. And that is enough for now.'

'You will… travel with us?'

'I would be honoured to,' said the primarch. 'I could ask this of any of my fleets, I know. But you were the one to raise me back to my feet, when my ignorance had murdered a world. So I am asking you.'

'I… Sire… I…'

Lorgar laughed again, his golden hands reaching to prevent Argel Tal from kneeling a second time. 'Is that a yes?'

'By your word, Aurelian.'

'Thank you. It's a new age, Argel Tal. A new age of vision and discovery. Every Word Bearer fleet will be cast to the winds of fate, sailing where they will. We will reach farther from Terra than any other Legion, pushing the Imperium's boundaries with each world we take.'

Argel Tal knew where this was leading. It could only be going one way. He sensed Xaphen approaching from behind, though the Chaplain elected to say nothing.

'We are seekers,' Lorgar smiled, enjoying the word on his tongue. 'We seek the place where gods and mortals meet – seeking divinity in a galaxy my father believes is godless.'

Lorgar clasped his hands together, and lowered his head in readiness for prayer.

'The Legion will undertake the Pilgrimage.'

III

The Faceless Tarot

THE CARDS ARE faceless, devoid of illustration. This is intentional – it's what makes them so valuable, for they respond to the touch of an unseen sense, never relying on a lesser artist's imagery to limit the human consciousness.

The crystal wafers are cored by a psychoreactive liquid, the images taking shape in the celadon resin as the tarot reader holds each card in his hands.

He had hoped, in time, that every psychically gifted soul in his father's Imperium would come to learn this tarot. Instead, their creation had been scorned – even by Magnus (who had no need of such foci for his powers) and Leman Russ (who derided them even as he cast runestones and knucklebones in a bid to see the future).

It will soon be time to leave Colchis.

He turns the first card. In its milky surface, he sees a burning torch carried in a strong hand. *Truth.*

Something calls to me. That is a truth I am only now coming to accept. Something out there is calling to me.

I am not Magnus, to stare into space and easily hear the heartbeat of creation. My powers are not those of my dearest brother, nor my ascendant father. But something has always called to me. In my youth, it reached my mind as visions, nightmares, hallucinations. And now…

Erebus and Kor Phaeron – through their patience and guidance – aided me in growing attuned to the call.

My tutors in the Covenant, and my heart's family now. We meditated, pored over the Covenant's texts, and we decided the Legion's destiny.

Something calls me, faint but infinite, prickling my sixth sense like an echo in the stars.

HE TURNS THE second card, and sees himself – robed and cowled, turning away so as to avoid his own gaze. A common card, this one. *Faith.*

Humanity is nothing without faith.

Faith raises us above the soulless and the damned. It is the soul's fuel, and the driving force behind millennia of mankind's survival. We are hollow without it. Existence is cold and arbitrary in a godless galaxy – faith shapes us, raises us above all other life, defines us as perfect in our sentience.

In eras where faith was choked, weakness and decay infested the species, withering its innards. That is something the Emperor, beloved by all, has always known, but never admits.

Yet he knows, and he forges his empire accordingly. A god need not be named a god in order to stand in supremacy. Names are meaningless. Supremacy matters – and my father stands ascendant over all mortal life in the galaxy: a god in power, a god in wrath, a god in vision.

A god in all but name.

THE OLD FAITH of Colchis is one that shares roots in thousands of human cultures, across thousands of worlds. That alone is evidence that somewhere within its meandering parables, and the unsubtle blending of myth into history and history into myth, there exists a core of absolute truth.

The loveliest legend is that of the empyrean, the Primordial Truth.

It is known by countless names, of course. The empyrean is the name we spoke on Colchis. Others named it heaven – a means of existing into eternity, long after the death of the mortal form. A realm of infinite possibility: a paradise of potential where the souls of every mortal in history coil around one another.

Even I know such things are myths, stories spoken and passed down imperfectly through countless generations.

But… imagine it. Imagine the reality behind the myths. Imagine a place in the universe where gods and mortals meet. Imagine the miracles of power that could be performed.

Imagine a state of utter chaos, utter purity, where anything is possible. Life ends in death, but existence does not.

If there is truth to the Old Faith, I will find it.

HE TURNS THE third card. A haze of heat makes the sky shimmer above a skyline of towers and domes. Colchis. The City of Grey Flowers. *Home.*

The people of Colchis have always looked to the stars for answers. The Legion born on that world, the Bearers of the Word, is no exception. Many Chapters within the Legion are named for the constellations that brighten the night sky. Even the name they bestowed upon me, the name spoken by no one outside the Legion, has its foundations in antiquity. 'Aurelian', they call out as they wage war. 'The golden'.

Yet its linguistic roots go further back, to a truer meaning, created by those ancestors that forever stared skyward for inspiration.

Aurelian. The sun.

It is natural for us to seek answers in the stars. Life comes from them. The Emperor descended from them. The Legion rose into them.

Fate awaits us beyond them.

COLCHISIAN LEGENDS TELL tales of primitive space-faring vessels leaving the world in search of the gods, much in the same way the Afrikaharan and Grecianic peoples of Ancient Earth once sought their deities. I have read the fragments that remain of their cultures, and I have walked the ways of the past with my brother Magnus. The travels of Osyrus and Odisseon in Terran myth are the travels of Khaane, Tezen, Slanat and Narag – prophets born of Colchis, great seekers now lost to time's embrace.

Their journey to seek the home of the gods is known to us as the Pilgrimage.

HE TURNS THE fourth card. The psychoreactive liquid forms architectural wonders in his fingertips: an arching bridge, a mean-

dering path of stone through a great garden… *A journey. A pilgrimage.*

The Pilgrimage is the oldest legend in the Covenant of Colchis, and the one most often seen in human cultures scattered across the galaxy. Humanity has a fundamental need to believe in it. The Primordial Truth: heaven, paradise… It exists somewhere, in some form – home of the gods, underworld of the daemons. The layer behind natural reality. Anything is possible within its boundaries.

The Pilgrimage is nothing less than the journey to see it with one's own eyes. To confirm where mythology ends and faith begins.

Heaven. Hell. Gods. Daemons.

I will have the answers I seek.

HE TURNS THE fifth and final card. The Emperor, bedecked in finery, all details writ with punishing clarity except the one aspect that matters: his face. *A golden lord.*

I was weaned on the old scrolls – the very scrolls we cast aside in favour of worshipping the Emperor. Now, I cannot help but look back to the teachings of my youth, and think of those legends and their cores of truth.

In crude imagery, the old works showed a stain on the stars – a scar in reality, where the Primordial Truth reached out into the universe of flesh, bone, blood and breath. Each of them foretold of a golden lord, a being of godly power that would carry humanity to divine perfection. It had to be my father. It had to be the Emperor. And I believed it was, until the moment it was not.

He was not the golden lord. The Emperor will carry us to the stars, but never beyond them. My dreams will be lies, if a golden lord does not rise.

I look to the stars now, with the old scrolls burning runes across my memory. And I see my own hands as I write these words.

Erebus and Kor Phaeron speak the truth.

My hands.

They, too, are golden.

PART TWO

PILGRIMAGE

Three years after the Legion's departure from Colchis

IV

A Child's Dreams

I CAN ONLY imagine how the primarch's heart shattered when the Pilgrimage ended.

Three years of the Seventeenth Legion scattered across the stars. Three years of the Word Bearers sailing farther and faster than any of their brother warriors, reaching into the edges of space and pulling the boundaries of the Imperium with them.

So much of humanity's dominion over the stars is owed to the sons of Lorgar – a bitter reality after the years of ponderous, meticulous advancement, earning them nothing but scorn.

But I know the temperament of this Legion. For every peaceful compliance – for every culture brought into the Imperium and quietly encouraged to follow the new Word – there will have been a world that now spins in space as a dead husk, fallen victim to the Word Bearers venting their wrath.

The Pilgrimage revealed many truths: the flaws written into the Legion's precious gene-seed; the arcane gestation of Lorgar Aurelian himself; the existence of the neverborn – named as daemons, spirits and angels by a million ignorant generations of mankind. But the greatest truth revealed was also the hardest to accept, and it broke a primarch's heart.

And of course, it changed his sons. The Word Bearers could never go back to a time before the truth.

Argel Tal and Xaphen were my closest links to a world I could no longer see, and the Pilgrimage's destination changed them in ways far more profound than mere physical differences. The knowledge was a burden to them: that they and their brothers in the Word Bearers Legion must be the ones to return to the Imperium with this terrible truth.

I cannot conceive how they endured, being the heralds of such tidings. To be the ones chosen to enlighten an entire species that humanity would struggle from now until the day creation died. There would be no Golden Age, no era of peace and prosperity. In the darkness of the future, there would be only war.

Perhaps we are all playing the roles marked out by the gods. People who are destined for greatness will often dream great dreams as children. Fate shapes them for the years to come, offering their young minds a teasing glance at what will be.

Blessed Lorgar, Herald of the Primordial Truth, dreamed like this. His childhood was tormented by visions of his father's arrival – a god of gold, descending from above – as well as nightmares of someone unknown, something unseen, forever calling his name.

And that is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Word Bearers Legion. Their father knew he would be one of those bringing enlightenment to humanity, but he could never foresee how it would come to pass.

The primarch has spoken of his brothers and how they dreamed similar dreams. Curze, born on a world of eternal night, dreamed of his own death. Magnus, Lorgar's closest kin, dreamed the answers to the universe's mysteries. One was cursed with foreknowledge; the other blessed by it. Both were destined to do great things as they reached maturity. Their actions have shaped the galaxy, just as Lorgar Aurelian's have.

As for myself, I only remember one nightmare from my youngest years.

In my dream, I sat in a blackened room, as blind in the darkness then as I am now. And in that darkness I sat in silence, listening to a monster breathe.

Where is the line between prescience and fantasy? Between prophecy and a child's imagination?

The answer is simple. Prophecy comes true.

We just have to wait.

— Excerpted from *'The Pilgrimage'*, by Cyrene Valantion

TWELVE

Death
Final Flight of Orfeo's Lament
Two Souls

XAPHEN LAY DEAD at the creature's feet.

His spine twisted, his armour broken, a death that showed no peace in rest. A metre from his outstretched fingers, his black steel crozius rested on the deck, silent in deactivation. The corpse was cauled by its helm, its final face hidden, but the Chaplain's scream still echoed across the vox-network.

The sound had been wet, strained – half-drowned by the blood filling Xaphen's ruptured lungs.

The creature turned its head with a predator's grace, stinking saliva trailing in gooey stalactites between too many teeth. No artificial light remained on the observation deck, but starlight, the winking of distant suns, bred silver glints in the creature's unmatching eyes. One was amber, swollen, lidless. The other black, an obsidian pebble sunken deep into its hollow.

Now you, it said, without moving its maw. Those jaws could never form human speech. *You are next.*

Argel Tal's first attempt to speak left his lips as a trickle of too-hot blood. It stung his chin as it ran down his face. The chemical-rich reek of the liquid, of Lorgar's gene-written blood running through the veins of each of his sons, was enough to overpower the stench rising from the creature's quivering, muscular grey flesh. For that one moment, he smelled his own death, rather than the creature's corruption.

It was a singular reprieve.

The captain raised his bolter in a grip that trembled, but not from fear. This defiance – this was the refusal he couldn't voice any other way.

Yes. The creature loomed closer. Its lower body was an abomination's splicing between serpent and worm, thick-veined and leaving a viscous, clear slug-trail that stank of unearthed graves. *Yes.*

'No,' Argel Tal finally forced the words through clenched teeth. 'Not like this.'

Like this. Like your brothers. This is how it must be.

The bolter barked with a throaty chatter, a stream of shells that hammered into the wall, impacting with concussive detonations that defiled the chamber's quiet. Each buck of the gun in his shaking hand sent the next shell wider from the mark.

Arm muscles burning, he let the weapon fall with a dull clang. The creature did not laugh, did not mock him for his failure. Instead, it reached for him with four arms, lifting him gently. Black talons scraped against the grey ceramite of his armour as it clutched him aloft.

Prepare yourself. This will not be painless.

Argel Tal hung limp in the creature's grip. For a brief second, he reached for the swords of red iron at his hips, forgetting that they were broken, the blades shattered, on the gantry decking below.

'I can hear,' his gritted teeth almost strangled the words, 'another voice.'

Yes. One of my kin. It comes for you.

'This… is not what… my primarch wanted…'

This? The creature dragged the helpless Astartes closer, and burst Argel Tal's secondary heart with a flex of thought. The captain went into violent convulsions, feeling the pulped mass behind his ribs, but the daemon cradled him with sickening gentleness.

This is exactly what Lorgar wanted. This is the truth.

Argel Tal strained for breath that wouldn't come, and forced dying muscles to reach for weapons that weren't there.

The last thing he felt before he died was something pouring into his thoughts, wet and cold, like oil spilling behind his eyes.

The last thing he heard was one of his dead brothers drawing a ragged breath over the vox-channel.

And the last thing he saw was Xaphen twitching, rising from the deck on struggling limbs.

HE OPENED HIS eyes, and saw he was the last to awaken.

Xaphen stood stronger than the others, his crozius maul in his hands. Through the blur of Argel Tal's returning consciousness, he heard the Chaplain speaking orders, encouragement, demands that his brothers stand and pull themselves together.

Dagotal remained on his knees, vomiting through his helm's mouth grille. What he produced from his stomach was much too black. Malnor leaned against the wall, his forehead pressed to the cool metal. The others were in similar states of disarray, hauling themselves to their feet, purging their guts of stinking ichor, and whispering litanies from the Word.

Argel Tal couldn't see the daemon. He looked left and right, targeting reticule not locking on to anything.

'Where is Ingethel?' he tried to ask, but the only sound he made was a sick, thick drawl of wordless growling.

Xaphen came over to him and offered a hand to help him rise. The Chaplain had removed his helm, and in the chamber's gloom the warrior-priest's face was unnaturally pallid, but otherwise unchanged.

'Where is Ingethel?' Argel Tal repeated. This time, the words came forth. It was almost, but not quite, his voice.

'Gone,' Xaphen replied. 'The vox is back online, and power has been restored to the ship. Squads are checking in from all decks. But the daemon is gone.'

Daemon. Still so strange, to hear the word voiced out loud. A word from mythology, spoken as cold fact.

Argel Tal looked up at the glass dome ceiling, looking out into the void beyond. There was no space. Not true space, at least. The void was a swirling, psychotic mass of flensed energy and

clashing tides. A thousand shades of violet, a thousand shades of red. Colours humanity had never catalogued, and no living beings had seen before. Stars, stained by the riot of crashing energies, winked through the storm like bloodshot eyes.

At last, in the window's reflection, he saw himself. Pearls of sweat rolled down his face. Even his sweat stank of the daemon: bestial, raw, ripe – the reek of organs, failing to cancer.

'We need to get out of here,' said Argel Tal. Something moved in his stomach, something cold uncoiling within him, and he swallowed acidic bile to keep from throwing up.

'How did this happen?' Malnor groaned. None present had ever heard the stoic warrior so unmanned.

Torgal staggered over to them, rubbing reddened eyes in sallow sockets. His chestplate was painted with a messy scorch-streak of burned ceramite – the black acid-burn of his vomit.

'We need to get back to the fleet,' he said. 'Back to the primarch.'

Argel Tal caught sight of his own broken blades, scattered in jagged pieces across the decking. Repressing the sting of loss, he reached for his discarded bolter. As soon as his gauntleted fingers touched the grip, an ammunition counter on his eye lenses flickered at zero.

'First, we need to get to the bridge.'

EVERY HUMAN ON board was dead.

This was something Argel Tal had first feared as he moved in a lurching stride from corridor to corridor. The fear became reality as more and more of Seventh Company's squads voxed to report the same thing.

They were alone here. Every servitor, every serf, every slave and preacher and artificer and servant was dead.

Deck by deck, chamber by chamber, the Word Bearers hunted for any sign of life beyond themselves.

Smaller than *De Profundis*, the destroyer *Orfeo's Lament* was an attack ship, a sleek and narrow hunter, not a line-breaking assault vessel like many Astartes cruisers. Its crew numbered just

under a thousand humans and augmented servitors at full complement, in addition to the hundred Astartes – a full company's worth.

Ninety-seven Word Bearers remained alive. Of the humans, not one.

Three Astartes had simply not awoken as the others had. Argel Tal ordered their bodies burned, with the remains to be blasted out of an airlock as soon as the ship managed to get clear of the warp storm.

When, and if, that would ever be.

Evidence of the human crew's demise was everywhere to behold. Argel Tal, bred without the capacity to feel fear, was not immune to disgust nor shielded by his genes from feeling regret. Each corpse he passed watched him with a lifeless stare and open jaws. They screamed in silence. Shrunken, yellowed eyes accused him with every step he took.

'We should have defended them from this,' he murmured the words aloud without realising.

'No.' Xaphen's tone invited no argument. 'They were naught but resources for the Legion. We do the Legion's work, and they were the price we paid.'

Not the only price, Argel Tal thought.

'This decay,' he said. 'I don't understand.' The captain's pace was increasing with each step he took, and the closer he came to the bridge, the nearer he found himself to running. Strength flooded him, its presence a welcome contrast to the weakness only minutes before.

The hallway was a major thoroughfare running along the ship's ridged back like a spinal column. At all hours of day and night, it was busy with crew members going about their duties.

Except now. Now it was silent but for Argel Tal's footsteps, and his closest brothers with him. Rotting bodies lay gaunt and withered along the decking, husked by the dry, stale air put out by the ship's oxygen scrubbers.

'These bodies have been dead for weeks,' said Xaphen.

'That's not possible,' Malnor said. 'We were unconscious for no more than a handful of minutes.'

Xaphen looked up from where he knelt by the desiccated corpse of a servitor. Its bionics had shaken loose of the withering organic limbs, and lay pristine on the floor.

'Unconscious?' he shook his head. 'We were not *unconscious*. I felt my hearts burst in that beast's claws. I *died*, Malnor. We all died, just as the daemon said we would.'

'My hearts beat now,' the sergeant replied. 'As do yours.'

Argel Tal saw the same. Retinal displays didn't lie. 'Now,' he said, 'is not the time. We need to get to the bridge.'

The warriors moved again, stepping over the dried corpses that grew more frequent as they neared the command deck.

EIGHTY-ONE DEAD bodies waited for them on the bridge.

They lay sprawled or sat hunched, with several locked foetal on the floor, while others were cringing, curled, in their seats.

'They knew what was happening,' said Xaphen. 'This wasn't fast. They felt something as they died.'

Argel Tal hesitated by the twisted figure of Captain Janus Sylamor, curled in her throne as if she sought, in her last moments, to escape something that prowled nearby. Her sunken features, almost mummified, told him all he needed to know.

'Pain,' he said. 'What they felt was pain.'

Dagotal was already by one of the drive consoles, dragging an officer's body off the controls. The cadaver slumped to the decking, only to find its rest further disturbed by Xaphen, who set about examining it – carving into it – with his combat blade.

Dagotal swore in back-alley Colchisian. 'I drive a jetbike, sir. I can't fly an Imperial warship, even if we had the slaves necessary to feed the engine furnace.'

Argel Tal turned from the ship captain's husk. 'Just give me an overview.'

His voice still didn't sound, didn't feel, quite right. As if someone nearby was speaking the words in unison with him, in mocking chorus.

'We're dead in space,' Dagotal adjusted more controls to no effect. 'Power hasn't been restored to all systems. Not even close. The Geller Field is enabled, but we lack void shields, plasma propulsion, energy weapons, projectile weapons, and life support on half the decks.'

'Manoeuvring thrusters?'

'Sir,' Dagotal hesitated. 'We've drifted significantly in the storm's tides from where we came to all stop. Taking that into account, and lacking warp flight… On manoeuvring thrusters it will take us at least three months to break clear of the… nebula.'

'It's not a nebula,' Xaphen murmured. 'You've seen what's outside. It's not a nebula.'

'Whatever in the name of hell it is,' Dagotal snapped back.

'Hell is a good enough word for it,' Xaphen muttered, still distracted in his work.

Argel Tal lifted the body of Captain Sylamor from the oversized Astartes command throne, laying her to rest at the edge of the command deck. When he returned, he took her place, his armour clanking against the metal of her seat.

'Fire the thrusters,' he ordered. 'The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be back with the fleet.'

'Bloodless,' Xaphen announced. He rose from his knees, blade in hand, the grisly dismemberment complete at his feet. Vox-officer Amal Vrey's autopsy would never enter any official record, but it was unarguably thorough.

'The bodies,' Xaphen said, 'they're bloodless. Something leeched the blood from their veins, killing them all.'

'Ingethel?'

'No, Ingethel was with us. Its kin did this.'

Its kin. The daemon's words resurfaced in Argel Tal's aching mind. *'Yes. One of my kin. It comes for you.'*

He felt something slither within him. Something stirring, wrapping around the bones of his arms and legs, coiling in a tight spiral around his spine.

'Summon every warrior to the bridge,' he ordered, hearing his own voice echoing in his mind, a silent chorus twinned with his words.

'And Dagotal,' said Argel Tal, 'get us out of here.'

THE SHIP THAT limped its way from the warp storm was a far cry from the noble Imperial vessel that had cut its way in. It trailed psychic fog around its membrane-thin Geller Field, turning in a slow roll that spoke of flawed guidance systems and damaged stabilisers.

Pulsing from its mangled communications towers was a repeated message, the Colchisian words rendered into fuzz by detuned vox.

'This is the *Orfeo's Lament*. Critical casualties sustained. Grievous damage. Requesting extraction. This is the *Orfeo's Lament*…'

'CONTACT RE-ESTABLISHED with *Orfeo's Lament*,' called out one of the bridge crew.

The command deck of *De Profundis* was alive with activity – a hive of officers, servitors, analysts and crew members of every stripe, all working around a central platform that rose above the consoles. On the platform, a golden giant in robes of grey silk watched the occulus screen. His face, so close to the face of his father, was softened in a way the Emperor's never was: Lorgar was both curious and concerned.

'Already?' he said, glancing to the officers at the vox-console.

'Sire,' the Master of Auspex called from his bank of flickering monitors, 'the ship is… horrifically damaged.'

The bustle of the bridge began to quieten, as more and more crew members watched the occulus, seeing the *Orfeo's Lament* in its powerless drift.

'How can this be?' Lorgar leaned on the handrail ringing the raised podium, his golden fingers gripping the steel. 'That's not possible.'

'Receiving a distress pulse,' said one of the vox-officers. 'Sire… My primarch… The *Orfeo's Lament* has suffered critical casualties. We're getting an automated message.'

Lorgar covered his parted lips with a hand, unable to conceal his unrest where another primarch might have stood stoic. Worry was etched onto his handsome features, replacing the confusion that had taken hold moments before.

'Play the message, please,' he asked in a soft voice.

It came through in a crackle of vox, grating across the bridge speakers.

'…the *Orfeo's Lament*. Critical casualties sustained. Grievous damage. Requesting extraction. This is the *Orfeo's Lament*…'

'How can this be?' he asked again. 'Master of Vox, get me a signal to that ship.'

'By your word, sire.'

'Argel Tal,' Lorgar breathed his son's name. 'I know his voice. That was Argel Tal.'

At his side, Fleetmaster Baloc Torvus nodded, his stern features emotionless where his primarch's were tormented. 'Aye, sire. It was.'

Contact took three and a half minutes to restore, during which the rest of the 1,301st Fleet had raised its shields and armed all weapons. Tug-ships sailed from the flagship's docking bays, ready to drag the limping *Lament* back to its sister vessels.

At last, a picture resolved on the occulus, showing the other vessel's bridge. Audio contact filtered back a few seconds afterwards, heralded by a burst of static.

'Blood of the Emperor,' Lorgar whispered as he watched.

Argel Tal wore no helm. His face was gaunt, a pathetic wraith of his former vitality, with his eyes ringed by the dark smears of countless restless nights. Speckles of old blood decorated the left side of his face, and his armour – what was left of it – was pitted and cracked, devoid of any holy parchment.

He rose from his command throne on unsteady legs and saluted. There was the softest bang as his fist hit his breastplate.

'You're… still here,' he rasped. All strength was gone from his voice.

Lorgar was the one to break the silence. 'My son. What has befallen you? What madness is this?'

Behind Argel Tal, other figures were moving into view. Word Bearers, all. They were just as weak, just as ruined, as their commander. One fell to his knees as Lorgar watched, praying in a senseless stream of conflicting words. It took several moments for the primarch to realise it was Xaphen, recognisable only because of the broken black armour.

Argel Tal closed his eyes, letting out a breath. 'Sire, we have returned, as ordered.'

Lorgar glanced at Torvus, before turning back to Argel Tal. 'Captain, you've been gone no more than sixty seconds. We just witnessed the *Lament* enter the edges of the storm. You return to us less than a minute after your departure.'

Argel Tal scratched his ravaged face, shaking his head. 'No. No, that cannot be.'

'It can be,' Lorgar stared hard at him, 'and it is. My son, what happened to you?'

'Seven months,' the captain sagged, leaning on the arm of his throne to keep standing. 'Seven. Months. There are barely forty of us left. No food. We ate the crew… hateful mouthfuls of leathery flesh and dry bones. There was no water. Water tanks ruptured in the storm damage. We drank promethium fuel… weapon oils… engine coolant… Sire, we've been killing each other. We have been drinking each other's blood to stay alive.'

Lorgar looked away only for long enough to address one of the vox-officers. 'Bring them in,' he said, pitching his voice low. 'Get my sons off that ship.'

'Sire? Sire?'

'I am here, Argel Tal.'

'The *Lament* has had its final flight. We are on guidance thrusters alone.'

'Thunderhawks are already launching,' the primarch assured him. 'We will return to safer space together.'

'Thank you, sire.'

'Argel Tal,' Lorgar hesitated. 'Did you slay the crew of *Orfeo's Lament*?'

'No. No, sire, never. We ate their carcasses. Carrion-feeders. Like the desert jackals of Colchis. Anything to survive. We had to bring you the answers you sought. Sire, please… There is something you have to know. We have the answers to all your questions, but one above all.'

'Tell me,' the golden giant whispered. He was unashamed at the tears in his eyes, to see his sons reduced to… to this. 'Tell me, Argel Tal.'

'This place. This realm. Future generations will name it the Great Eye, the Eye of Terror, the *Occularis Terribus*. In hushed voices, they will give a thousand foolish names to something they cannot understand. But you were right, my lord.

'Here,' Argel Tal gestured with a weak hand at the seething warp storm visible through the bridge windows, 'is where gods and mortals meet.'

SOON, HE WAS in isolation. Taken from his brothers.

This was not entirely unexpected, but they had also taken his weapons – 'for much-needed maintenance, brother' – and that, he'd not foreseen. They were cautious around him now. The escorts walking him to his meditation chamber had been tense, reluctant to speak, hesitant to answer even the simplest questions.

Never before had he felt this raw distrust between brothers. He knew what its genesis was, of course. The truth could never be hidden, and he had no desire to hide it. Yes, the survivors had eaten the human dead. Yes, they had butchered their own brothers. But not for sport. Not for glory. For survival.

To quench a lethal thirst, with the coppery wine that runs from cut veins.

What other choice was there? To die? To die away from the fleet, with the answers to every question the primarch had ever asked locked behind their dead lips?

But you did die. The traitorous thought rose behind his focus. *You did die.*

Yes. He did. He'd died before he chewed on the leathery skin of bloodless bodies. Before he'd used his dagger to slice open his brothers' throats and drink their life to sustain his own.

Some of them had died twice, then. A final death, to fuel the lives of those who would survive.

Thirty-eight Word Bearers had left the wreck of *Orfeo's Lament*. Thirty-eight, from one hundred. Far below half-strength. Seventh Company was devastated.

Argel Tal drew in a shivering breath. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the storm outside. In the warp's roiling tides, ten million faces silently screamed his name. He saw their lips moving, their teeth bared, their faces formed of clashing, psychic energy spilling across the ship's Geller Field barrier. The flesh and blood of unformed daemons. The raw matter of souls.

He exhaled, and opened his eyes.

The walls of his personal chamber, his haven aboard *De Profundis* for so many years of the Great Crusade, seemed alien now. Strange, how seven months could change a soul. Seven months, and a skull full of unbridled revelations.

The chronometer above the doorway mocked him with a date over half a year in the past. The primarch's words were an unwanted truth: seconds had passed at the edges of the warp anomaly. Months dragged by within.

Stripped of his armour, the captain examined his wasted body in the reflection of his dagger, the only weapon remaining to him. A revenant returned his gaze – a skeletal, hollow-eyed creature on the wrong side of the grave.

He lowered the blade, and awaited the chime he knew would come soon.

IN HIS HUMILITY, Lorgar had never looked grander.

He came to Argel Tal wearing the layered, glyph-embroidered robes of a Covenant priest, with the hood raised, darkening his features. In his hands he carried a small wooden chest; the box

was open, revealing a selection of vulture-feather quills with an inkpot. Under one arm, the primarch bore a roll of papyrus parchments to record his son's words. As Lorgar entered, Argel Tal saw the hulking forms of two Word Bearers – brothers from the Serrated Sun, but not Seventh Company – standing outside his door.

Standing guard outside his door.

'Am I a prisoner, father?' he asked the primarch.

Lorgar drew back his hood, revealing his eternally youthful face and the uncertain smile upon it. His grey eyes were heavy with emotion, and little of it was pleasant. He grieved for his sons. He grieved for what he saw now.

'No, Argel Tal. Of course you are not a prisoner.' Their eyes met in that moment, and Lorgar's smile froze on his perfect lips.

'The guards at my door would seem to suggest otherwise,' said Argel Tal.

Lorgar didn't answer. The beautifully carved wooden box crashed to the bare metal floor. The noise drew attention, and the bulkhead door slammed open. Two warriors from 37th Company came in, bolters aimed at Argel Tal's head.

'Sire?' they asked as one.

The primarch didn't answer them, either. He stood in rapt silence, reaching out, almost touching the captain's gaunt face. At the last moment, he drew his hand back before his fingers brushed Argel Tal's sunken flesh.

Their eyes were still locked: primarch and captain, father and son.

'You have two souls,' Lorgar whispered.

Argel Tal closed his eyes to break the stare. Something – a hundred somethings – slithered through his blood, worming within his veins, pushed on by his heartbeat.

He rose to his feet at last.

'I know, father.'

'Tell me everything,' said the primarch. 'Speak to me of the daemon, and the world of revelation. Tell me why my son stands before me with his soul cleaved in two.'

THIRTEEN

Incarnadine
Stormlost
Voices in the Void

'1301-12.' As Argel Tal spoke the code, acidic saliva stung the underside of his tongue.

1301-12, the twelfth world to be brought to compliance by the 1301stExpeditionary Fleet. 'Of the seven worlds we conquered in three years,' he said, 'this was the most painful.'

Lorgar did not disagree.

'And yet,' the primarch said, 'it was also bloodless. Not a shot fired in anger, nor a blade drawn in rage. The pain was born of revelation.'

'Three years, sire,' said Argel Tal, looking away from his father's eyes. 'Three years, and seven worlds. History will point to those worlds, the husks we left, and describe how the XVII Legion vented its wrath in the wake of our failure. World after world burned, the populations butchered to slake our fury.'

Lorgar's smile was pyrite-false. 'Is that how you see our Pilgrimage?'

'No. Never. But seven worlds died in fire, and we were almost destroyed after leaving the eighth.'

Lorgar's grey gaze didn't waver for a moment. He was seeing with his sixth sense, looking into his son's heart, and sensing the second soul gestating there.

'Enough of this maudlin remembrance,' Lorgar's tone betrayed his impatience. 'Speak of the world we found.'

'Do you remember,' Argel Tal asked him, 'when we first reached orbit?'

THE FLOOR WAS trembling in a most specific way.

Xi-Nu 73 processed this. Beneath his metal feet, the rumble of the ship's deck had a very particular pulse – neither the arrhythmic flow of warp flight, nor the heartbeat tremor of sustained guidance thrust. Instead, murmurs coursed through his artificial bones, faint but blessedly metronomic.

Orbit.

Orbit, at last.

The last journey had been a long one. Xi-Nu 73 wasn't a being given to indulging in speculation beyond the present, but his calculated projections were grim. The warp storms battering the fleet would certainly have claimed more than the three ships they'd already taken, had the 1,301st pressed on even farther past this world.

Xi-Nu 73 had heard one of his menials tell another that 'the storm outside was hurling itself at the ship's shields', and he'd berated the worker for grafting human attributes onto an inappropriate subject. Such anthropomorphosis would harm the servant's chances for future elevation within the Mechanicum.

It was a violent storm, no doubt there. But there existed no passion, no anger, no intent in the warp's tides.

Elsewhere on *De Profundis*, the decks were alive with activity, as Astartes and human crew made ready for planetfall.

Xi-Nu 37 was largely immune to the brain chemistry necessary to feel excitement, having reengineered himself beyond such sensation. Instead, he focused entirely on his work, which stimulated the pleasure centres of his brain – a minute amount for each subroutine performed with absolute accuracy and ergonomic efficiency.

His fingers – fifteen of them spread across three mechanical hands – worked in the armoured bowl of Alizarin's skull. It was a process of restructuring globs of bio-plastic, each one dripping with nutrient-rich juices, within the robot's head. Each tract of spherical relay globes needed to be fixed and sealed into position, then connected to the slave systems they controlled, as well as the fail-safes they relied on in incidents of battle damage. Such

were the workings of the robotic mind: an intelligence in mimicry of life, grown in a gene-lab to be used in a machine body.

The smell rising from this bowl of artificial cerebrospinal fluid was a revoltingly spicy reek reminiscent of rotting onions, but of course, Xi-Nu 73 had taken himself beyond the capacity to react to that as well. He only knew of the smell at all because his perceptive sensors streamed data onto his retinas, describing the stench in bland screeds of binary.

Despite the intricacies of his task, Xi-Nu 73 reserved a median five per cent of his focus to monitor his surroundings. Internal sensor arrays, perceiving the world through echolocation, first tracked the door to his workshop opening, then the movement of a figure traversing the chamber. The figure emitted an unmistakable power signature: armour, Mark III, Astartes.

Several other signals joined the first. Five Astartes in total.

These details flashed up as runic symbols on Xi-Nu 73's vision display. He paid them little heed, knuckle-deep as he was in organic slime, plugging tiny interface feeds into segmented spheres of bio-plastic. Each sphere was a part of the cortex program. Each fibre-optic link simulated synapses.

The Astartes had the good grace not to interrupt. They waited the three point three-two minutes until Xi-Nu 73 had finished the current phase of ministrations. A satisfaction pulse wormed through Xi-Nu's datacore. Dampened pleasure receptors fired. Work was complete.

At last, the Mechanicum adept turned from the workshop table. Ooze dripped from his fifteen metal fingers.

'Subcommander,' he said, neither acknowledging the senior sergeants at Argel Tal's side nor offering the kind of respectful bow usually given by mortal members of the crew. 'You are present to commence preparations on *Incarnadine*.'

Argel Tal was armoured for the coming planetfall, as were the officers with him. Xaphen, clad in black, Dagotal, Malnor and Torgal – all wearing the Legion's granite grey.

'It is time,' said Argel Tal.

Xi-Nu's three lens-eyes took a few seconds to refocus. 'This way,' the adept replied.

The warriors followed the machine-priest into the red-lit chamber beyond.

IT WASN'T THAT Xi-Nu 73 felt any shame in *Incarnadine*'s induction into the Word Bearers Legion. Such an honour was tantamount to the highest accolades in the Legio Cybernetica, and evidence of the commanding adept's mastery – such a machine clearly had a spirit of fierce intensity, and was worthy of recognition.

It was just that since the induction into the Serrated Sun, since the Chapter's sigil had been etched onto the robot's forehead, the Conqueror Primus of 9th Maniple was a touch more… erratic. The machine's spirit had the error-laden propensity to act unpredictably, and that was unacceptable.

Even to a veteran adept like Xi-Nu 73, this made no sense outside of his deepest, darkest suspicions. He'd run several hundred diagnostics, as was his meticulous duty, but the discrepancies (the flaws? The aberrations?) in *Incarnadine's* cortex would resurface after each maintenance.

On one occasion, never to be repeated, Xi-Nu 73 had taken the greatest, gravest risk, purging *Incarnadine*'s bioplastic brain. After flushing every trace of matter from the robot's skull bowl, he rebuilt the cortex over the space of four months, using spare parts, ritually cleansed after being taken from his supply caches.

The robot had a new brain, for Cog's sake. And still, *still*, it was…

Well. There was another problem. The Martian code-tongue lacked adequate description to summate the problem. Xi-Nu 73 had ventured the closest human term to describe the situation was that his Conqueror Primus was glitched. He considered this a symptom of his assignment, not just to the 1,301st Expeditionary Fleet, but to the Word Bearers Legion itself.

The war machines and expert technical crews of Carthage Cohort were spread across the many Word Bearers fleets, rather

than housed on their own Mechanicum vessels the way the Titan Legions were. Lorgar's own insistence made it thus. Decades before, when the Legio Cybernetica had first approached the Word Bearer lord, Lorgar had generously offered to modify his vessels to accommodate the specialist needs of his new Mechanicum allies.

'We are all brothers under the same god's gaze,' he'd said to the Fabricator-General, during his first visit to the surface of Mars. Apparently, a concordance was reached soon after. The Carthage Cohort, one of Cybernetica's proudest armies, would march with the XVII Legion, and dwell in the bowels of their vessels.

Xi-Nu 73 had not been present at the time this ancient oath was sworn – had not even been flesh-born back then – and this contributed to his doubts about the tale's veracity. The reason it never cogitated as pure truth to Xi-Nu's perceptions was simple: despite how useful the Carthage Cohort was to the Word Bearers Legion, the Astartes simply did not like the Mechanicum element in their midst. Relations were closer to cold than cordial, even taking the Mechanicum's inhumanity into consideration.

It was said other Legions worked more harmoniously with the Martian Cybernetica cult, especially the blessed Iron Hands and unbreakable Iron Warriors – both of whom enjoyed the Mechanicum's immense (and immensely valuable) respect from the first days their forces joined together in the Terran Emperor's crusade.

But over time, Xi-Nu 73 – who had most humbly risen to oversee a maniple of four robots – came to realise that the Word Bearers were not like their Astartes brothers. It was an opinion shared by others of his rank, on those increasingly rare occasions he established contact with them.

As the fleets moved farther and farther apart since the last grand gathering at Colchis three years before, so too did contact between the Carthage maniples wane. Vox-signals would never reach across such distances. Even astropathy was rumoured to be becoming unreliable – not that Xi-Nu 73 had access to such a talent.

Xi-Nu 73's principal problem where the Word Bearers were concerned was their fundamental organic nature. In short, they were *too human.* They valued the flawed aspects of faith, focusing on the flesh and the soul, rather than transcendence through oneness with the Machine-God. They were fuelled by emotion, rather than logic, which affected their tactical decisions and their very goals in the Great Crusade.

Most tellingly of all, many of the Serrated Sun's warriors seemed uncomfortable around the Mechanicum adepts themselves, as if forever on the edge of voicing some accusation, or framing a grievous complaint.

Too human. That was the problem. Too emotional, too driven by instinctive faith and eloquent diction. Too human, resulting in distance between the factions.

The exception to this distance was a source of disquiet for Xi-Nu 73, because the exception was his own Conqueror Primus.

Incarnadine, blessings upon its brave soul, was sincerely respected by the Word Bearers.

Indeed, they called it 'Brother'.

HE LED THE Astartes into the preparatory chamber, where his wards were undergoing the final rituals before reawakening. The three armoured machines stood in impassive silence, doted on by Mechanicum menials, all under Xi-Nu 73's command. Two of the robed attendants were lifting *Vermillion*'s back-mounted las-cannon, hefting it up along its greased runner track, testing the smoothness of motion as they brought it up to the firing position on the Cataphract's shoulder.

Sanguine, the gangly Crusader-class twin to *Alizarin*, was almost ready. The juddering clank of autoloaders filled the chamber as its shoulder cannon was fed fresh stores of ammunition. Servitors oiled its joints, only allowed near the war machine now that the vital work was complete.

Incarnadine was waiting for them.

That fact brought a stab of irritatingly human unease to Xi-Nu 73's thought processes. The robot's combat wetware was about to

be installed, and then *Incarnadine* would be ready for deployment. But there it was: the anomalous reading in its brain patterns. An attention spike in the otherwise flat-lining rumble of its cognition. This flare of perception, along with the faintest adjustment of its visual receptors, only ever occurred in the presence of Word Bearers.

Like an animal instinctively recognising its kin, *Incarnadine* knew when warriors of the XVII Legion were near.

This was why Xi-Nu 73's pride was tainted. The robot's cortex shouldn't have allowed for this level of recognition without its combat wetware installed. It shouldn't be able to distinguish between targets and non-targets – seeing no difference between Astartes, human soldiers, aliens, or anything else.

In fact, it shouldn't be able to perceive anything at all beyond the presence of walls and floors, with the simple operational understanding not to crash into anything. And yet the robot had been waiting for this moment. Xi-Nu 73 tracked the glitch in *Incarnadine*'s sensors as the Conqueror Primus recognised the Word Bearers before it.

'*Incarnadine*,' said Argel Tal, and the voice broke the adept's scrambled line of reasoning. The subcommander wore no helm, and Xi-Nu 73 saw the Astartes looking up at the towering machine. With no small reverence, the warrior unrolled a scroll of parchment, and began to read.

'As a warrior of the Seventeenth Legio Astartes, the Bearers of the Word, a brotherhood born of Colchis and born of Terra, do you swear to fight in the name of Lorgar – heart and soul, body and blood – until the world below, designated One-Three-Zero One-Nine, is brought to lawful compliance with the Imperium of Man?'

Incarnadine stood in silence. Argel Tal smiled, and didn't look away.

'*Incarnadine*,' said Xi-Nu 73 from his position to the side, 'swears the oath as it is written.'

The Astartes continued as if the adept wasn't even there. '*Incarnadine*, your oath of moment is witnessed by your brothers…'

'Dagotal.'
'Torgal.'
'Malnor.'
'Xaphen.'
'…and affirmed by myself, Argel Tal, Subcommander of the Serrated Sun.' The captain affixed the scroll to *Incarnadine*'s armour plating, mounting it on the hooks designed especially for this use. All five of the Astartes wore similar scrolls attached to their shoulder guards.

Xi-Nu 73's pride warred with his unfading irritation. Praise to the Omnissiah for the blessing of his own Conqueror Primus being accepted into an Astartes Legion's ranks, but curse the influence such a loyalty was having on its cortex.

The ritual completed, the Astartes saluted with their fists over their primary hearts, and made their way from the chamber. There'd been a time when the warriors would have made the sign of the aquila, but Xi-Nu 73 hadn't seen them perform the Imperial salute since the Legion's shaming three years before.

In the red-lit gloom of the chamber, the adept focused his trilens gaze on the hulking form of his favoured ward.

'Where do your loyalties lie, I wonder?'

Incarnadine didn't answer. It stood as it had for hours now: silently awaiting the next battle.

The ship shook again – even in orbit, the void around this new world was rich with warp energies, and occasional pulses of force brushed the ship's skin. Xi-Nu 73 had also stripped his brain function to deplete the fantastical outreaching of his human imagination, and yet the squealing of the storm against the hull sounded like… claws.

He filed the sound in his lobe archives, and went about his duties, only occasionally disturbed by the sound of nails clawing at the metal hull.

THE BLESSED LADY really needed to put some clothes on.

She reached blindly over the edge of her bed, her hand patting the floor, questing until she found her robe. Cyrene was slipping

the garment over her head when she felt Arric's arms encircling her from behind.

'It's still early,' he said, breathing the words against her neck.

'Actually, I think you're already late. That wasn't the dawn chime, it was the signal for noon.'

'Don't joke,' he said, pulling her closer.

'I'm not joking.' Cyrene ran her fingers through her hair, ignoring his as they quested over her. 'Arric,' she said, 'I'm really not joking.'

He rolled out of bed with an 'Oh, *shit*…' before repeating the curse a number of times, in various languages.

Being in love with an officer could, at times, be an educational experience – especially ones that could swear in eighteen Gothic dialects.

'Shit,' he finished the tirade back where he started. 'I have to go. Where the hell is my sabre?'

She faced him without seeing him. 'I think it slid under the bed. I heard it scrape on the floor last night.'

'Where would I be without you?' Arric dragged the blade out from beneath the bed, and fastened the leather belt around his crumpled, unbuttoned uniform. 'I'll be back later,' he said.

'I know.'

'Planetfall today,' he said, as if it would somehow be news to her. The ship quivered around them, and she reached out to the wall, steadying herself.

'I know,' she said.

'Though with this storm…'

'I know,' she said again.

'How do I look?' he spoke the words with a grin, always enjoying this oldest of rituals between them. Usually she smiled back. Not this time.

'Like someone who is late for a meeting with fleet command. Now go.'

ARGEL TAL NODDED to Major Jesmetine as the human officer half-tumbled through the closing doors.

'I'm here,' he called out. 'I made it.'

His ochre uniform, marking him as a senior commander in the 54th Euchar Infantry, wouldn't pass muster on a parade ground without some serious tidying up first. His black hair was in a similar state, and he'd not shaved this morning, either.

He regarded the others gathered in the briefing room, where they all stood around an expansive central table. Forty men, women and Astartes (the latter, he smirkingly liked to call 'post-humans') turned to regard him in turn.

Above them, the chamber's illumination globes flickered as the ship shuddered again.

'Sorry,' said the major. 'I'm here now.'

Several heads shook, while irritated mutters broke out. The officer took one of the few places left at the table, next to a Word Bearer captain. The charged hum from the warrior's armour joints was ear-achingly loud up close. It made it a chore to hear the others' voices.

'Good of you to join us, Arric,' Fleet Commander Baloc Torvus said, scowling down the table at the breathless major. 'As I was saying—'

'My apologies,' the major interrupted again. 'The servitors on D deck are struggling with the… elevator… gyro-cogs. Something of a nightmare, really. Had to run the long way.'

From across the chamber, the armoured figure of Chapter Master Deumos thudded a fist onto the table.

'Be quiet, you fool,' he grunted.

'Sorry, sir.' Arric saluted – the pre-Crusade fist over his chest, rather than the aquila.

Xi-Nu 73 turned his hooded head with a rattle of grinding gears. 'There is no component in the ship's construction matching the term "gyro-cog",' he noted.

Arric narrowed his eyes at the tech-adept. *Thanks for that.*

'I am aware,' the Word Bearer lord growled, 'that Major Jesmetine was lying through his teeth with very little skill. Torvus, get on with the details. We have a world to bring to compliance.'

Torvus began his summary, detailing land masses, population projections, and the disposition of forces. The people of 1301-12 were primitives, yet the entire Expeditionary Fleet was preparing for war: Army contingent, Astartes companies, Mechanicum forces – everything.

It all depended on first contact.

Arric listened to the things he'd already studied in the official reports. He caught the Word Bearer captain next to him glancing down.

'Did you comb your hair with your fingers?' Argel Tal asked.

The doors slid open before Arric could reply, but the retort would have been a rude one. Clad in ceremonial armour of chainmail and a breastplate of carved ivory, the primarch entered the war room.

'My friends, please accept the sincerest apologies for my untimely arrival.' Lorgar favoured them all with a beatific smile before taking his place at the head of the table. 'I trust all is in readiness for planetfall?'

The gathered commanders assured him that it was. Resplendent in the ceremonial armour of a Covenant warlord, Lorgar listened to their reports in turn.

'Sire,' one said, at the conclusion.

'Speak, Argel Tal.'

'One matter still troubles me. It has been three weeks now,' the captain said, ignoring the mutters that started up. 'Where is the *Unending Reverence*?'

Lorgar rested his golden hands on the central table, leaning forward. All present could see in his eyes how much the words cost him.

'It is stormlost. We will mourn the crew, and our brothers on board. But it is folly to hold out hope any longer.'

'Sire…' Argel Tal was far from placated. 'We will not even search for them? One vessel stormlost is a tragedy, but three… Aurelian, please, the Expedition is threatened. We must seek them.'

'How? In the warp?'

Another judder gripped the ship, this one lasting several moments. Lorgar smiled a downcast little smile, no doubt amused at the timing of the ship's renewed trembling. 'Even the aftershocks of this storm are savage. You wish to dive back into the warp to hunt three atoms in a whirlwind?'

'I call again for the astropaths to make the attempt,' said Argel Tal. 'If they can find their counterparts on the *Reverence*—'

'My son,' Lorgar shook his head. 'Your compassion does you great credit, but we cannot halt the Pilgrimage on account of one lost warship. The warp is a cruel mistress. How many vessels has the Imperium lost in its tides over the course of the Great Crusade? Hundreds? Perhaps even a thousand or more.'

Major Arric tapped a few buttons on his own data-slate. 'We're on the frontier, and we all know it. Reinforcements aren't coming our way, no matter how loud we shout for help. How regularly are we receiving word from other fleets now?'

'The time between contacts is rising exponentially,' said Phi-44. 'The last astropathic transmission from Lord Kor Phaeron's main fleet was four months ago.'

Xaphen spoke up now. 'The first captain's last message contained updated star charts showing the Legion's expansion to the Galactic Rim, and a list of compliances achieved. It also contained the sincerest gratitude for the eight thousand more words and three pict references to be added to their fleet's copies of the *Book of Lorgar*.'

The primarch chuckled, but said nothing.

Xaphen continued, 'The closest Imperial expedition to us is the 3,855th, almost a year's warp flight distant.'

'What Chapters lead the 3,855th?' asked Deumos.

'The Bloodied Visage,' Phi-44 confirmed, 'and the Crescent Moon. And Chaplain Xaphen is incorrect. The 3,855th Expeditionary Fleet is between thirteen and fifteen months distant, depending on the vagaries of the warp.'

Silence fell.

'A year,' said Lorgar. 'How far we have come, to serve as humanity's eyes in the dark. No other Imperials have spread them-

selves this far apart, nor travelled this far from Terra and its conquered territories.'

A year. Argel Tal was struck by the distance put into such terms. *We are over a year's flight distant from our nearest brothers, and even farther from the Imperium's true edge.*

'So we're well and truly alone,' Arric echoed the captain's thoughts, and the ship punctuated his words with another savage tremor.

'Sire,' Argel Tal began again.

'Peace, my son,' the primarch cut him off with a gentle lift of his hand. 'Master Delvir? Can you offer Captain Argel Tal the solace he seeks?'

The Master of Astropaths was a watery-eyed rake of a man, clad in a robe of colourless grey that hung off his shoulders in velvet waves. He regarded the room with a kicked dog's expression as he realised more and more faces were turning his way.

'Our auguries are… That is to say… Our senses are… I can hear the world we move towards. It's difficult to put into words.'

Lorgar cleared his throat to draw the man's attention. 'Master Delvir?'

'My lord?' the man asked in his whispery voice.

'You are among equals, here. Friends. We all sympathise with the pressures the storm has placed upon you. Do not be nervous or hesitant in explaining the details.'

Shosa Delvir, Master of Astropaths, bowed without much in the way of grace. But it was sincere. Lorgar returned the bow, not to same depth, but with a smile.

'Sometimes,' the astropath began slowly, 'mere chance is enough to bring an Imperial fleet to one of humanity's lost worlds. Blessed are those occasions. More often, we rely upon the few ancient star charts that endured the chaos of Long Night and the Unification Wars that ravaged Terra. But when you rely upon us – when you call upon the astropathic choir – I… I will explain it as best I can.'

'THAT,' ARGEL TAL watched his father writing the words down, 'was the first moment my blood ran cold. Anchored above the world, when the astropath told us how his kind saw through the storm.'

Lorgar nodded. 'It was the moment I first knew we were reaching the end of the Pilgrimage,' he said.

'There's truth in that,' the captain sighed.

No longer did their eyes meet as Argel Tal spoke. The delicate scratching of a feather quill on parchment provided the only accompaniment to Argel Tal's spoken words.

THE MASTER OF Astropaths only hesitated for a moment.

'We hear voices in the void,' he said. 'A world is a hive of sound, the buzzing of locusts or flies, but far, far in the distance. It is never easy to make out one world in the endless reaches of space. The Imperium is an ocean of silence, and only the most intense focus allows us to hear the hum of human sentience. Imagine yourselves beneath the water of a great sea. All sound is muted, while the silence is powerfully oppressive. Now try to listen for voices in the nothingness, when all you can hear is your own heartbeat.'

'Sire…' Deumos interrupted. 'Must we listen to this crude prose?'

Lorgar's answer was to press a golden finger to his smile. 'Let Master Delvir speak. I find his words enlightening.'

The astropath pressed on, avoiding any of their gazes. 'If you focus too hard on listening for voices, you will forget to swim. You'll drown. If you devote all your energy to swimming for the surface and breathing once more… you will hear none of the ocean's sounds.'

'You strive for balance,' said Argel Tal. 'That does not sound easy.'

'It is not, but no soul in this room can lay claim to an easy existence.' The astropath offered a respectful bow to the gathered warriors. Several acknowledged his respect with a salute. Argel Tal was one of them. He liked the scrawny little man.

'What has changed?' the captain asked. He felt the primarch's eyes upon him.

'This region of space is like no other we've seen in our travels. The warp is savage, and our ships are slaves to raging tides of aetheric energies.'

'We have all seen warp storms before,' said Lorgar. The glint in his grey eyes spoke volumes: he knew all of this, and was leading the astropath on, letting the psychic sensitive explain it to the fleet's commanders.

'This is different, sire. This storm has a voice. A million voices.'

It was safe to say he had the council's attention. Argel Tal tasted poison as he swallowed. On a whim, he keyed in an activation code onto the table's hololithic projector.

In flickering imagery, the region of space – zoomed out to display hundreds of suns and their systems – was beamed above the central table. It was impossible to miss what was wrong.

'This region here,' the astropath gestured. 'If the choir closes its eyes and reaches out with its secret senses… all we hear is screaming.'

The area was vast. Bigger than vast. It covered hundreds upon hundreds of solar systems, ugly even on the hololithic. The warp anomaly showed as a gaseous fog staining the stars, coiling down to a centre of roiling, boiling energy.

'When you all look at this,' said Arric Jesmetine, 'does anyone else see an eye? An eye in space?'

Many agreed. Lorgar did not.

'No,' the primarch said. 'I see a genesis. This is how galaxies appear when they are born. My brother Magnus showed me such things in the Hall of Leng, on fair Terra. The difference is that this… birth… is not physical. This is the ghost of a galaxy. You all see an eye, or a spiral. Both are right, both are wrong. This is the psychic imprint of some incredible stellar event. It was powerful enough to rip the void apart, letting warp space bleed into the corporeal galaxy.'

The astropath nodded, awed gratitude in his eyes as the primarch spoke the words he lacked himself.

'That is what we believe, sire. This is not merely a warp storm. This is *the* warp storm, and it has raged for so long that it now saturates physical reality. The entire region is both space and unspace. Warp and reality, all at once.'

'Something…' Lorgar stared at the bruised heavens, his gaze distant. 'This is an abortion. Something was almost born here.'

Argel Tal cleared his throat. 'Sire?'

'It's nothing, my son. Just a fleeting thought. Please continue, Master Delvir.'

The astropath had little more to say. 'The storms that have wracked our journeys these last weeks emanate from this region. Around 1301-12, space is relatively stable. But think of the storm we endured to reach this point of stability. That storm blankets thousands of star systems around us. If we break from this narrow corridor, the energies playing out would be…'

He trailed off. Lorgar looked at him sharply. 'Speak,' the primarch commanded.

'An old Terran term, sire. I would have said the storm is apocalyptic.'

'What does that mean?' asked Argel Tal.

It was Xaphen that answered. 'Damnation. The end of everything. A very, very old legend.' The thought seemed to amuse him.

'If the storm is nothing but screaming,' Argel Tal turned to Delvir, 'then how did we find this world? How could you hear the life upon it?'

The astropath took a trembling breath. 'Because something on the world below us screams even louder.'

'Something,' the captain said. 'You did not say "someone".'

The robed man nodded. 'Do not ask me to explain, for I cannot. It sounds human, but is not. The way you would hear another warrior's accent and know him to be from another part of your home world, the astropathic choir hears something inhuman screaming in human tongues.'

Lorgar cut off the discussion with a motion of his hand. 'This region is unmapped and unnamed. What vessels were lost in the journey through the storm?'

Phi-44 answered before the fleetmaster could. 'The *Unending Reverence*, the *Gregorian* and the *Shield of Scarus*.'

The Word Bearers present inclined their heads in respect. The *Shield* had been the strike cruiser of their own Captain Scarus and his 52nd Company. Their loss was a savage blow to the Serrated Sun, finding itself at two-thirds strength purely by the warp's fickle winds.

'Very well,' said Lorgar. 'Ensure all stellar cartography is updated, with records sent back to Terra. This region is hereafter known as Scarus Sector.'

'Will we make planetfall, sire?' This from Deumos.

With infinite care, the primarch took a rolled parchment from a wooden tube at his belt. He unrolled it with a precious lack of haste, and finally turned it to face them all. On the papyrus scroll, a spiralling stain was sketched in charcoal. Everyone recognised it immediately. It was already before them – the stain across the stars.

As the commanders watched, a vicious shiver ran through the ship. Emergency lighting stained all vision red for several seconds, and the hololithic winked out of existence. Argel Tal rekeyed the activation code as the lights returned.

The image flared back into jagged, unreliable life.

'Bitch of a storm,' Major Jesmetine muttered. A few quiet agreements were all the response he got.

'This is drawn from memory,' said Lorgar, meeting their eyes in turn. 'But my Word Bearers will recognise it.'

'The empyrean,' the Legion officers said at once.

'The Gate of Heaven,' Xaphen amended, 'from the old scrolls.'

'We were summoned here,' Lorgar said, his voice low and clear and unbroken by doubt's shadow. 'Something called out to our astropathic choir through the storm. Something wanted us here, and something awaits us on the planet below.'

The astropath broke decorum, possibly for the first time in his quiet and sheltered life. 'How… how can you know that?' he stammered the words through pale lips.

Lorgar let the scroll fall onto the table. Something like anger burned behind his eyes.

'Because I hear the screaming, too. And it is not wordless. Something on the world beneath us is crying out my name into the psychic storm.'

FOURTEEN

Violet Eyes
Two Voices
Answers

ARGEL TAL LOOKED at his reflection in the cup of water. Thin fingers touched the stark geography of his face. It was like stroking a skull.

Lorgar didn't look up from writing.

'Planetfall,' said the captain.

VIOLET EYES.

It was only apparent deviation from the purestrain human breed. With violet eyes, the people stared at the emissaries from the stars. Barbarians, dressed in rags and wielding spears tipped by flint blades, confronted Lorgar and his sons.

And yet, the primitives showed little fear. They approached the Word Bearers' landing site as a disjointed horde, divided by tribes, each host carrying flayed-skin banners and animal bone totems denoting their allegiance to the spirits and devils of their world's faith.

Lorgar had taken a small host to make first contact with the humans of 1301-12. The rest of the fleet remained ready in the heavens above, but Lorgar preferred to orchestrate first contact in more humble ways.

At his side stood Deumos, Master of the Serrated Sun, with the captains Argel Tal and Tsar Quorel of the Seventh and Thirty-Ninth Companies respectively. Both captains brought their Chaplains, who in turn stood with their crozius mauls drawn. Behind them, one figure stood skeletally slender, clad in a hooded robe. Three mechanical eyes peered out from the cowl as Xi-

Nu 73 watched proceedings taking place. At his side, *Incarnadine* waited motionless, exuding threat without moving a gear.

Only one figure stood apart from the pack; clad in gold, bearing a spear of exquisite craftsmanship. Vendatha, the Custodian. Aquillon would not be dissuaded from one of his brothers joining them. The Occuli Imperator made it a point for at least one of his warriors to always accompany the primarch on incidents of first contact.

The Custodian's red helmet crest fluttered in the wind, as did the parchment scrolls bound to the Word Bearers' armour. He stood closest to Argel Tal. In all Vendatha's time with the fleet, no other Astartes present had showed him – or the other Custodes – the ghost of respect, let alone an offer of friendship.

At their backs, a Legion Thunderhawk sat at rest – traditional granite-grey, for Lorgar's golden Stormbird remained with the 47th Expedition. The primarch didn't miss it, even three years since last setting eyes upon it. The gunship's ostentation had always reeked more of gaudiness than grandeur. Let the preening Fulgrim adorn his war machines like works of art. Lorgar's tastes ran to less puerile pursuits.

'Their eyes,' said Xaphen. 'Every one of them has violet irises.'

'Look up,' the primarch spoke softly.

Xaphen obeyed. They all did. The warp storm wracking the region shrouded most of the night sky, a great spiral stain of reds and purples staring down like an unblinking eye.

'The storm?' Vendatha asked. 'Their eyes are violet because of the storm?'

Lorgar nodded. 'It has changed them.'

Xaphen rested his crozius on his shoulder as he still stared into the sky. 'I know the warp can infect psychics with the flesh-change, if their minds are not strong enough. But normal humans?'

'They are impure,' Vendatha interrupted. 'These barbarians are mutants…' he gestured with his spear at the approaching tribes, '…and they must be destroyed.'

Argel Tal glanced to his left, where the Custodian stood with his halberd lowered. 'Does this not fascinate you, Ven? We stand on a world at the edge of the greatest warp storm ever seen, and its population comes to us with eyes the same colour as the tortured void. How can you damn that before asking why it happens?'

'Impurity is its own answer,' said the golden warrior. He refused to be drawn into debate. 'Primarch Lorgar, we must cleanse this world.'

Lorgar didn't look at the Custodian. He merely sighed before speaking.

'I will meet these people, and I will judge their lives myself. Pure, impure, right and wrong. All I want is answers.'

'They are impure.'

'I am not slaughtering the population of an entire world because my father's war hound whined at the colour of their eyes.'

'The Occuli Imperator will hear of this,' Vendatha promised. 'As will the Emperor, beloved by all.'

The primarch took a last look at the blazing sky. 'Neither the Emperor, nor the Imperium, will ever forget what we learn here. You have my word on that, Custodian Vendatha.'

THE FIRST OF the barbarians approached.

Draped around her shoulders was a cloak of discoloured peach-brown, heavy like bad leather, bound by crude black stitching. Her eyes, that beautiful and disquieting violet, were ringed by white paint, daubed in tribal runes over her face. The symbols meant nothing to Vendatha.

But the cloak did.

'Degenerates…' the Custodian hissed over a closed vox-channel. 'That is human skin. Dried, cured, worn like a cloak of honour.'

'I know,' Argel Tal replied. 'Lower your weapon, Ven.'

'How can Lorgar deal with these creatures? Flayers. Primitives. Mutants. They coat their skin in meaningless hieroglyphs.'

'They're not meaningless,' said the captain.

'You can read those runes?'

'Of course,' Argel Tal sounded distracted. 'It's Colchisian.'

'What? What does it say?'

The Word Bearer didn't answer.

LORGAR INCLINED HIS head in respectful greeting.

The barbarian leader, at the head of over a hundred ragged people dressed in similar rags and armour of disquieting 'leather', showed no trepidation at all. More tribes were still converging from across the plainsland, but they held back, perhaps in deference to the young woman with the raven hair.

Skulls tied to her belt rattled as she moved. Despite reaching the primarch's waist, she seemed utterly at ease as she lifted her mutated eyes to meet the giant's own.

When she spoke, a heavy accent and clipped syllables couldn't disguise the language completely. It had come far from its proto-Gothic roots, but the Imperials recognised it, some with greater ease than others.

'Greetings,' the primitive said. 'We have been waiting for you, Lorgar Aurelian.'

The primarch let none of his surprise show. 'You know my name, and you speak Colchisian.'

The young woman nodded, seeming to muse on the primarch's deep intonation, rather than agreeing with Lorgar's words. 'We have waited many years. Now you walk upon our soil at last. This night was foretold. Look west and east and south and north. The tribes come. Our god-talkers demanded it, and the warchiefs obeyed. Warchiefs always heed the shaman-kind. Their voices are the voices of the gods.'

The primarch watched the crowd for signs of such respected tribal elders. 'How is it that you speak the tongue of my home world?' he asked their leader.

'I speak the tongue of *my* home world,' the woman replied. 'You speak it, also.'

Despite the burning skies and the surprises the girl brought, Lorgar smiled at the stalemate.

'I am Lorgar, as you foresaw, though only my sons call me Aurelian.'

'Lorgar. A blessed name. The favoured son of the True Pantheon.'

Through great effort, the primarch kept his voice light. No stray nuance could allow this first contact to go wrong. Control was everything, all that mattered.

'I do not have four fathers, my friend, and I am not of woman born. I am a son to the Emperor of Man, and no other.'

She laughed, the melody of the sound stolen by the blowing wind.

'Sons can be adopted, not merely born. Sons can be raised, not merely bred. You are the favoured son of the Four. Your first father scorned you, but your four fathers are proud. So very proud. The god-talkers tell us this, and they only speak truths.'

Lorgar's casual facade was close to cracking now. The Word Bearers sensed it, even if the humans did not.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I am Ingethel the Chosen,' she smiled, all innocence and kindness. 'Soon, Ingethel the Ascended. I am your guide, anointed by the gods.' The barbarian woman gestured at the plain, as if it encapsulated the world itself. More tellingly, she gestured to the warp-wracked void above.

'And this world,' she spread her painted hands in benevolence, 'is Cadia.'

IT WAS SOMETHING of a unique first contact.

Never before had the Imperials been expected like this. Never before had they been greeted by a primitive culture that not only welcomed them, its people showed no fear at all in the face of giant armoured warriors striding through their midst. The Thunderhawk attracted some curiosity, though the primarch had warned Ingethel that the vehicle's weapons were active, manned by Legion servitors who would open fire if the Cadians drew too close.

Ingethel waved the curious men and women away from the Word Bearers gunship. The language she spoke was quick and flourishing, with a wealth of unnecessary words bolstering every sentence. Only when she addressed Lorgar and his retinue did she seem to strip the language down to its core, striving for brevity and clarity, evidently speaking Colchisian rather than Cadian.

LORGAR STOPPED HIS son's words with a concerned glance.

'You are snarling as you speak,' the primarch said.

'It is unintentional, sire.'

'I know. Your voice is as divided as your soul. I can see the latter with my psychic sense – two faces stare out at me, four eyes and two smiles. None would ever know of it, save perhaps my brother Magnus. But to know the truth, one has only to listen. Mortal ears will know of your affliction, Argel Tal. You must learn to hide it better.'

The captain hesitated. 'I was under the belief that I'd be destroyed after telling you all of this.'

'That is a possibility, my son. But I would take no pleasure in seeing you dead.'

'Will the Serrated Sun be purged from Legion records?'

Before speaking, Lorgar trickled fine, powdery sand onto the parchment, helping to dry the inked words he'd written thus far.

'Why would you ask that?'

'Because where once three hundred warriors once stood loyal, now barely a hundred remain alive. Of the three companies, one remains whole. Deumos is dead, slain upon Cadia. A hundred of our brothers were stormlost, taken by the warp on the Shield of Scarus*. And now my company returns to you broken and… changed.'*

'The Serrated Sun will always be a lesson for the Legion,' said Lorgar, 'no matter how the Pilgrimage ends. Some things must never be forgotten.'

Argel Tal took a breath. In the exhalation was a whispering sound. Something was laughing.

'I do not wish to speak of Cadia, sire. You already know everything I know that transpired on the surface. The nights of discussions with Ingethel and the tribal elders. The comparisons of our star charts with

their crude maps of the heavens. Their pictographs of the Eye of Terror, and how the Cadians' images of the storm matched the empyrean from our scrolls of the Old Faith.' Argel Tal laughed, and the sound lacked any humour. 'As if we needed more evidence.'

Lorgar was watching him closely.

'What, sire?'

'The storm that blights this subsector. You called it the Eye of Terror.'

Argel Tal froze. 'That… Yes. That's what it will come to be called. When it opens wider across the void, when the trembling Imperium sees it as the galaxy's own hell. A void-sailors' dramatic name for the greatest mystery of the deep. It will be scrawled onto maps and digitally inscribed into stellar cartography databanks. Humanity will give it that name, as a child names its own simple fears.'

'Argel Tal.'

'Sire?'

'Who is speaking to me now? That is not your voice.'

The captain opened his eyes. He didn't recall closing them.

'It has no name.'

Lorgar didn't answer at once. 'I believe it does. It has identity, as strong as yours. But it slumbers. I sense its dissipation within you. You absorb it into the cells of your body like…' here, he paused again. Argel Tal had often wondered what it was like to see all life on every possible level, even the genetic one – the lives and deaths of billions of barely measurable cells. Could all primarchs perceive thus? Merely his own? He had no idea.

'Forgive me, sire,' he said to Lorgar. 'I will keep my eyes open.'

Lorgar's breathing quickened. No unaugmented man would be able to discern the difference in the primarch's heartbeat, but Argel Tal's senses were keener than a human's by many degrees. In truth, they were keener than Astartes perception now. He could hear the tiniest creak-stresses in the metal walls of his chamber. The guards' breathing outside the sealed bulkhead door. The skittering whisper of an insect's legs in the ventilation duct.

He'd felt this acuity before, back on Orfeo's Lament*, during the seven months of drift-sailing in their bid to escape the Eye. The feeling had*

come many times, in truth, but none as strongly as when only a brother's blood quenched his thirst.

'I see two souls at war within you, and the violence behind your eyes. Yet I wonder,' the primarch confessed, 'if you are cursed or blessed.'

Argel Tal grinned, showing too many teeth. It wasn't his smile. 'The difference between gods and daemons depends largely upon where one stands at the time.'

Lorgar wrote the words down.

'Speak to me of the last night on Cadia,' he said. 'After the religious debates and the tribal gatherings. I have no interest in repeating weeks of research and rituals performed in our honour. The fleet's data-core is swollen with evidence that this world, like so many others, shares unity with the Old Faith.'

Argel Tal licked his teeth. It still wasn't his smile. 'None so close.'

'No. None as close as Cadia.'

'What do you wish to know, Lorgar?'

Here, the primarch paused, hearing his name leave his son's lips with such casual disregard. 'Who are you?' he asked, neither threatened nor fearful, but not quite at ease.

'We. I. We are Argel Tal. I. I am Argel Tal.'

'You speak in two voices.'

'I am Argel Tal,' the captain said through clenched teeth. 'Ask what you will, sire. I have nothing to hide.'

'The last night on Cadia,' said Lorgar. 'The night Ingethel was consecrated.'

'THIS IS HEATHEN sorcery,' said Vendatha.

'I don't believe in sorcery,' Argel Tal said back. 'And neither should you.'

Their voices echoed in the temple chamber, which was no more than a roughly-hewn room in the endless network of subterranean caverns. With no structures of human craft on the face of Cadia, the Temple of the Eye was far less grand than its name suggested. Beneath the northern plains where the Legion had made planetfall, the caverns and underground rivers formed a natural basilica.

'This world is a paradise,' Vendatha remarked. 'It beggars belief that so many tribes come to dwell here in these deadlands.'

Argel Tal had heard this complaint before. Vendatha, in his blunt and stoic wisdom, had seen the orbital picts as often as the Word Bearer captain had. Cadia was a planet of temperate forests, expansive meadows, healthy oceans and arable land. Yet here, in an uninspiring corner of the northern hemisphere, the vagabond population gathered en masse to eke out a living on the arid plains.

Xaphen walked with Argel Tal and the Custodian down the stone corridor. The temple's construction was as flimsy as could be expected from a culture of primitives – the sloping walls showed the stone-scars of miners' picks and other digging tools – but the chambers weren't entirely devoid of decoration. Pictographs and hieroglyphs covered every wall, replete with symbols, charcoal murals and etched sigils that made little sense to Vendatha.

In truth, it hurt his eyes to look at many of them. Uneven, jagged stars were scrawled everywhere, as well as long mantras in a meaningless tongue, their sentence structure clearly indicative of verse. Sketches of the Great Eye, as the Cadians named the storm above, were also commonplace.

Torches of bundled sticks burned in wall sconces at irregular intervals, making the stone hallways misty with smoke. All in all, Vendatha had been to many more pleasant places. A pox on Aquillon for volunteering him to descend to the surface.

'It is not difficult to comprehend why they come here, when you understand faith,' said the Chaplain.

'Faith is a fiction,' Vendatha snorted.

Argel Tal had never wagered in his life – to gamble was against the Legion's monastic code; it showed a reverence for worldly wealth which was meaningless to all pure-hearted warriors – but he would have been safe to gamble that the words Vendatha spoke most often were: 'Faith is a fiction'.

'Faith,' said Argel Tal, 'means different things to different beings.' It was a weak attempt to sunder the argument he could feel

building between the other two, and it failed, just as he'd suspected it would.

'Faith is a fiction,' Vendatha repeated, but Xaphen went on, warming to his captive audience.

'Faith is why these people come here. It is why their temple stands at this spot. The stars are all in the right alignment at this place, and they believe it aids their rituals. The constellations mark the gods' homes in the sky.'

'Heathen magic,' Vendatha said again, getting annoyed now.

'Pre-Imperial Colchis was the same, you know.' Xaphen wouldn't let up. 'These rites are little different to the ones performed in the generations before Lorgar's arrival. Colchisians have always invested great significance in the stars.'

Vendatha shook his head. 'Do not add mindless superstition to the list of grievances I have against you, Chaplain.'

'Not now, Ven.' Argel Tal was in no mood for the two of them to go through yet another debate on the nature of the human psyche and the corruption of religion. 'Please, not now.'

While Argel Tal had slowly grown closer to the Custodes contingent in the past three years, often training his sword work with them in the practice cages, Xaphen seemed to take a kind of wicked delight in baiting them at every turn. Philosophical arguments almost always ended with Vendatha or Aquillon needing to leave the chamber before they struck the Chaplain. In turn, Xaphen counted these moments as great personal victories, and had an old man's cackle about the whole thing.

'If the stars are so precious to them,' Vendatha's voice was crackling through his helm's speakers, 'then why do they hide beneath the earth?'

'Why don't you ask them tonight?' Xaphen smiled.

The three of them walked on, and the silence lasted for several blessed moments.

'I hear chanting,' the Custodian sighed. 'By the Emperor, this is madness.'

Argel Tal heard it, too. The levels below them extended deep into the earth, but the thick stone carried sound with deceptive

ease. To walk in the temple-caverns was to hear laughter, footsteps, prayers and weeping – at all times of day and night.

On one of those lower levels, the ritual was underway.

'I have watched you clutch at parchments and babble to the Cadians in their own tongue for weeks now.'

'It's Colchisian,' Argel Tal said, distracted, as he ran his gauntleted fingers along a charcoal depiction of what looked like the primarch. The image was crude, but showed a figure clad in a robe, next to another figure in mail armour, with one gaping eye. They stood atop a tower, in a field of shaded flowers.

This wasn't the first such image Argel Tal had seen, yet they never failed to capture his interest. Serfs from the fleet had landed in huge numbers, set with the tasks of exploring the Cadian caves and taking pict references of every marking they found.

'Is this is how your Legion repents for failing the Emperor?' Vendatha asked. 'After so many compliances, I'd dared to perceive you all in a new light. Monarchia was a past sin. Even Aquillon believed the same. And now we come here, and everything unravels as you stutter to these wretches in alien speech.'

'It's Colchisian,' Argel Tal said, refusing to be riled.

'I may not be fluent in your monotonous tongue,' said Vendatha, 'but I know enough. What leaves the Cadians' lips is *not* Colchisian. Nor are these writings. This resembles nothing else. Its roots aren't even in proto-Gothic.'

'It's *Colchisian*,' Argel Tal said again. 'It's archaic, but it *is* Colchisian.'

Vendatha let the old argument go. Aquillon had already been informed, and had travelled down to the surface to see everything for himself. The Custodes leader was fluent in Colchisian, yet struggled with the words just as Vendatha did. The cognitive servitors brought down from orbit met with the same difficulties – no linguistic decoders could make sense of the runic language.

'Perhaps,' ventured Xaphen, 'we are a chosen Legion. Only those of Lorgar Aurelian's blood may speak and read this holiest of tongues.'

'You would delight in that being the truth, wouldn't you?' Vendatha snorted.

Xaphen just smiled in reply.

The Custodian's mood was black in the wake of his most recent failures to decipher the scrawls on these cave walls.

'What does this say?' he indicated a random verse written upon the uneven rock wall.

Argel Tal glanced at the prose, seeing more of the poetry he'd come to expect here: simple, more like a form of clumsy lyric than reverent chanting. Knowing the Cadians' god-talkers, this was likely the work of a shaman, maddened with hallucinogenic narcotics, spilling his stream of consciousness onto the sacred walls.

'…we offer praise to those who do,
That they might turn their gaze our way,
And gift us with the boon of pain,
To turn the galaxy red with blood,
And feed the hunger of the gods.'

'IT'S JUST MORE bad poetry,' he said to Vendatha.

'I cannot read a single word.'

'It's very artless,' Xaphen smiled. 'You're not missing any insight into an advanced culture.'

'It doesn't concern you that I cannot read this?' the Custodian pressed.

'I have no answer for you,' snapped Argel Tal. 'It's the feverish etchings of a long-dead shaman. It ties in to the Cadian belief in other gods, but its meaning is as lost on me as it is on you. I know nothing more.'

'Were the weeks spent with the primitives in their tent-city somehow not enough, Argel Tal? Now you must attend the false worship of ignorant barbarians?'

'You are giving me a headache, Ven,' said Argel Tal, barely listening. His retinal display tracked a digital counter of the last time he'd slept. Over four days now. The conclaves with the Cadians ate up a great deal of time, as the Word Bearers pored over

the humans' scriptures and discussed their faith's ties to the Old Ways of Colchis. Lorgar and the Chaplains were bearing the brunt of the ambassadorial and research efforts, but Argel Tal found his time occupied with plenty of tribal leaders pleading for his attention.

'I confess,' said Vendatha, 'that I'd hoped the Legion would avoid tonight's… foolishness.'

'The primarch ordered our presence,' Xaphen replied. 'So we will be present.' As the three warriors descended down more rough stone steps, the sound of distant drums grew more resonant.

'You have agreed to witness these degenerates perform a ritual without knowing what they intend.'

'I know what they intend,' Xaphen gestured at the walls. 'It is written everywhere, plain for all to see.' Before Vendatha could answer, the Chaplain added something that Argel Tal hadn't heard before. 'The Cadians have promised us an answer tonight.'

'To what?' both the Custodian and the captain asked as one.

'To what was screaming the primarch's name in the storm.'

ARGEL TAL CLENCHED his fist, but there was little anger in the gesture. He seemed content to watch the play of his muscles and the bones of his fingers working in natural, biological unity.

'Deumos,' he said. 'It was not easy to see him die.'

The primarch's quill stopped scratching at the parchment. 'Do you mourn him?'

'I did for a time, sire. But he has been dead over half a year to me. What I've seen since has made all previous revelations seem trivial.'

'You are snarling again.'

Argel Tal grunted acknowledgement, but had no desire to speak of it. 'The consecration,' he said instead.

THE CAPTAIN WAS surprised when he first entered the main cavern, which wasn't quite the same as being impressed.

It was certainly of considerable size, and given that the Cadians' technology was somewhere in the region of Terra's long-

forgotten Age of Stone, it had likely taken years to carve out the subterranean chamber and etch the murals, symbols and verses upon the walls and floors.

An underground river ran in a rushing torrent below dozens upon dozens of arched stone bridges. The curving walls were lit by more smoky torches, casting myriad silhouettes across the cavern that danced in frantic abandon to the sound of the drums.

A central island formed a hub for the bridges to meet in the middle. Here, naked in the firelight, her pale skin painted with twisted runes, was Ingethel. For the ghost of a moment, the symbols tattooed on her body drew Argel Tal's eyes. He recognised them all immediately, for each sigil was a stylised representation of a constellation drawn right from the night skies of Colchis. The Serrated Sun encircled the girl's navel in blue ink.

Drummers surrounded her in a ring, beating leathery skins with animal bones. Thirty in all – their harmonic pounding like the world's own beating heart. Hundreds and hundreds of Cadians lined the outer walls and walkways, all watching the performance as it was underway. Many chanted in praise of their heathen gods.

The alkaline smells of pure water, human sweat and ancient stone were almost overpowering, but Argel Tal still scented blood before he saw its source. Sensing his urgency, his visor tracked and zoomed across the scene. In the shadowed edge of the central ring, ten spears reached up from the ground.

The bases of nine of the wooden spears were streaked with blood and shit, forming sick pools on the stone. The spears themselves bore human fruit: each of the nine stakes played host to a tribesman – all impaled, all dead. The speartips thrust up through the dead men's open mouths.

'This cannot be allowed to continue,' said Vendatha. Disbelief softened his voice.

And this time, Argel Tal agreed with him.

Ingethel danced on, her lithe figure silhouetted into blackness by the bright fires behind her. At the heart of it all, not far from the maiden's undulating form, Lorgar towered above every other

living being. He watched in silence with his arms crossed over his chest, his features masked by a raised hood.

Deumos stood by the robed primarch's side, sweating in full battle armour. Captain Tsar Quorel and his Chaplain, Rikus, stood way behind. Both wore their helms. Both were watching the impaling spears, rather than the dancing human girl.

'Brother,' Argel Tal voxed to his fellow captain, 'what blasphemy have we intruded upon?'

Tsar Quorel's tone betrayed his own unease. 'When we arrived, the woman was as you see her, and the primarch stood here watching. The atrocities on the spears were already committed. We saw as you see now.'

Argel Tal led Xaphen and Vendatha over a stone walkway, approaching the primarch. Cadians scattered like vermin before a pack of hunting dogs, bowing, scraping, reaching out with shaking fingers to touch the Colchisian runes engraved on their armour.

'Sire?' Argel Tal asked. 'What is all this?'

Lorgar didn't look away from Ingethel. Her dance seemed carnal to Argel Tal's inexpert eyes, as if the maiden was mating with some unseen creature as part of her performance.

'Sire?' Argel Tal repeated, and the primarch glanced his way at last. Ingethel's shadow danced across his eyes, reflected there by the firelight.

'The Cadians believe this ritual will allow their gods to manifest among us.' His voice was as low as the drums.

'You allowed them to do this?' He stepped closer, showing more disrespect to his gene-sire than he ever had in his life, for his hands fell to rest upon his sheathed swords. 'You watched them commit human sacrifice?'

The primarch took no offence at his son's boldness. In truth, he seemed not to notice it. 'The blood offerings were made before I was invited into the sacred chamber.'

'Yet you are still taking part. You tolerate this. Your silence endorses this barbarism.'

Lorgar turned back to watch the girl's dance, which grew ever more frantic. Perhaps an edge of doubt marred his flawless features. Perhaps it was simply the maiden's shadow flickering over the primarch's face.

'This is no different to the rituals practised on Colchis only decades before your birth, captain. This is the Old Faith in all its theatrical glory.'

'This is an abomination,' Argel Tal took another step closer.

'All I want,' Lorgar enunciated each word with patient care, 'is an answer.'

Before them, Ingethel slowed in her whirling dance. Her tattooed skin was a living, sweating devotion to the Word Bearers' Chapters and the Colchisian night skies from whence they drew their names.

'It is time,' she said to Lorgar in a hoarse, breathless voice. 'It is time for the tenth sacrifice.'

The primarch tilted his head down at the girl, not quite a concession. 'And what is the tenth sacrifice?'

'The tenth sacrifice must come from the seeker. He chooses the slain. It is the final consecration.'

Lorgar drew breath to answer, but was denied the chance to speak.

A sinister crackle came into waspish life – all recognised the snapping buzz of a power weapon going live. Vendatha lowered his guardian spear, aiming the blade and bolter at Lorgar's heart.

'In the Emperor's name,' said the Custodian, 'this ends now.'

FIFTEEN

Sacrifice
Baptism of Blood
Unworthy Truths

'BY THE AUTHORITY invested in me by the Emperor of Mankind, I do judge thee a traitor to the Imperium.'

Lorgar watched Vendatha, his benign expression unchanging all the while.

'Is that so?' asked the primarch.

'Don't do this,' said Argel Tal. 'Ven, please, do not do this.'

Vendatha didn't take his eyes from Lorgar. The golden spire-helm faced forward, red eye lenses catching the flames' reflection. Around them all, the drums were starting to slow and fall quiet.

'If any of you reach for a weapon, this becomes an execution, not an arrest.'

The Word Bearers remained frozen. Some risks weren't worth taking.

'Lorgar,' whispered Ingethel. 'The ritual must not be interrupted. The wrath of the gods will—'

'Be silent, witch,' Vendatha said. 'You have said enough already. Lorgar, Seventeenth Son of the Emperor, do you yield to righteous authority and give your oath to abandon this den of heathen belief? Do you vow to return at once to Terra and submit to the Emperor's judgement?'

'No,' the primarch spoke softly. 'I do not.'

'Then you leave me no choice.'

'There is always a choice,' said Argel Tal.

Vendatha ignored the captain's plea. He reached for the scroll-work etched into his ornate bracer, and pushed one of the mother-of-pearl buttons inlaid in the decoration.

Nothing happened.

He pressed the button again.

Nothing continued to happen.

The Custodian took a step backwards as the Word Bearers very, very slowly drew their weapons. The Chaplains unlimbered their crozius mauls. Tsar Quorel and Deumos raised their bolters, and Argel Tal unsheathed the swords of red iron.

'I think you will find,' the primarch smiled, 'that your teleport signal has been blocked since you entered this chamber. Just a precautionary measure we took, you understand? Aquillon and your brothers will not be appearing to aid you. They will never even know you needed them.'

'I confess I had not anticipated this,' Vendatha said. 'Well done, Lorgar.'

'It's not too late, Ven.' Argel Tal raised his swords *en garde*. 'Lower your weapon and we can end this without crossing the line.'

'Great One…' Ingethel whined. 'The ritual…'

'I said *be silent,* witch,' snapped Vendatha.

Lorgar sighed, as if a great disappointment settled upon his shoulders. 'Decide now, Custodian Vendatha, how best to serve my father's Imperium. Do you flee, escaping this chamber, and bring a truth you don't even understand to your brothers in orbit? Or do you shoot me now, and rid the galaxy of its only chance at enlightenment?'

'The choice you offer is no choice at all,' Vendatha said.

Argel Tal moved first, launching forward as the cavern echoed with bolter fire.

VENDATHA WAS NOT a fool. He knew the odds of surviving the next few moments were slim, and he knew a primarch's reflexes were the peak of biological possibility, faster than even his own, which bordered on the preternatural.

But Lorgar was at ease, his muscles loose. He actually expected his offer of truce to hold some weight, and that lapse in judgement was enough for Vendatha to take the chance. He pulled the haft-trigger, and his spear's underslung bolter cracked off a stream of rounds on full-auto.

Argel Tal saw it coming. The swords of red iron smashed the first three bolts aside, their power fields strong enough to detonate the shells as they streaked towards the primarch's heart. The explosions threw the captain to the ground, his grey armour scraping along the stone with the shriek of offended ceramite.

Vendatha was already in motion. The golden warrior leapt at the primarch, guardian spear spinning in his fists, an oath to the Emperor on his lips. Four Word Bearers blocked his path, and those four Word Bearers had to die.

Rikus was the first to fall. The Custodian's blade crunched into the soft, jointed armour at the Chaplain's throat, punching from the back of his neck. Tsar Quorel died next, decapitated with a buzzing sweep of the energised blade, dead before he'd pulled his trigger.

Deumos managed to fire a stream of bolt shells, none of which connected. Vendatha weaved left, thudded the base of his spear into the Chapter Master's bolter, knocking it aside, and followed with a cutting swing that sheared both the Word Bearer's hands from his body, severing them at the forearms. Deumos had a scarce moment to draw in a stunned gasp before the spear sliced again, this time cleaving through his collarbone and spine, ripping his head free.

Vendatha span the blade in his hands, letting it come to rest with the tip and gun barrel aimed at Lorgar's heart again. Behind the Custodian, the bodies crashed to the ground in slow succession. Three seconds had passed.

Argel Tal was picking himself off the floor. Only Xaphen stood between the primarch and his attacker, but the Chaplain had used the scant, precious seconds to draw his bolter, which he aimed squarely at Vendatha's faceplate.

'Hold,' he warned.

'Lorgar, Seventeenth Son of the Emperor, surrender yourself into my custody at once.'

'You killed my sons,' Lorgar covered his mouth with a hand. 'They had never wronged you. Not once. Is this what my father's mandate allows you to do? To slaughter my sons if I do not dance to his ignorant tune?'

'Surrender yourself,' the Custodian repeated.

Vendatha had fought at the Emperor's side many times before. Always writ upon the Lord of Man's face was an unbreakable defiance, all emotion suppressed beneath the mask of stoic perfection.

Lorgar didn't share his father's capacity to conceal emotion. Hate bleached his features, and white teeth showed in a skull's grin.

'You dare threaten me? You murdered my sons, you soulless, worthless husk of *genetic overspill*.'

Vendatha squeezed the trigger again, but it was too late. Xaphen fired first.

Bolt rounds hammered into the Custodian's golden armour, beating the faceplate and chest out of shape, tearing chunks of plating away as they detonated. Each suit of battle armour was individually wrought for the Custodian granted the honour to wear it, and despite their finery, Custodes armour was a step beyond the mass-produced wargear used by the Astartes Legions.

Even so, the burst of bolter shells to the head and upper torso was almost enough to kill the warrior outright.

Vendatha staggered back, the guardian spear falling from slack fingers and crashing to the stone. Even with his face a burned and bleeding ruin, even with his helm wrecked and its twisted metal digging into his broken skull, he stared through the one eye that still worked.

Xaphen reloaded. The primarch did nothing. The naked maiden tugged at Lorgar's robe sleeve, imploring him to continue with the heathen rite, warning of the gods' anger if he didn't.

Vendatha reached for his fallen spear.

Wait. Where is Argel T—

The sword of red iron flew like a javelin, cracking Vendatha's remaining teeth into porcelain chips as it smashed into his closed mouth. Two metres of shimmering blade lanced from the back of the Custodian's head, while most of the warrior's ruined face was covered by the hilt and handle protruding from his open jaws.

As Rikus, Tsar Quorel and Deumos had done only moments before, Vendatha crashed to the ground, felled by an Imperial blade.

Xaphen released a breath. 'Nicely done, brother.'

The Chaplain had no warning, for Argel Tal struck without any. The captain's fist crashed into Xaphen's jaw, throwing him to the ground.

'Brother?' from his place on the stone floor, the Chaplain stared up at Argel Tal's fury.

'We have just killed one of the Emperor's own guardians, and your eulogy in this moment is "Nicely done, brother"? Are you *insane?* We stand upon the edge of heresy against the Imperium. Sire, we have to leave this place. We must speak with Aquillon, and—'

'Retrieve your blade,' ordered the primarch. Lorgar stared into the middle distance, paying little heed to what unfolded before his eyes. His voice barely lifted above a whisper.

Argel Tal approached with slow steps, taking his second sword back without gentleness, yanking it from the corpse's jaws. He froze as Vendatha's remaining eye followed him, and the body's fingers twitched.

'Blood of the… Sire, he's still alive,' Argel Tal called back.

'There is no virtue in cruelty,' murmured Lorgar. 'I wrote that once. In my book. I remember doing so. I remember the scratch of quill upon parchment, and the way the words looked on the page…'

'Sire?'

Lorgar stirred, focused. 'End his suffering, Argel Tal.'

All heads turned towards Ingethel as she cried out – wordless defiance, in a keening wail.

'This was ordained by the gods.' She gestured her tattooed hand to Vendatha's ravaged form. 'Lorgar is the seeker, the Favoured Son of the Great Powers, and he has provided the tenth sacrifice. Consecration may begin.'

A pack of Cadians came forward, their dirty hands pulling at Vendatha's golden armour, stripping it from his dying body. Argel Tal kicked one of the jackals off the fallen Custodian and levelled his blades at the rest. They scattered; carrion-feeders disturbed from a meal at the last moment.

'This was not a sacrifice for your blood magic,' the captain said. 'He aimed a weapon at the Emperor's son, and he will die for the sin. That is all.' Argel Tal looked over his shoulder. 'Sire, we have to leave. No answer is worth this.'

Lorgar lowered his hood, looking at neither Argel Tal nor Ingethel. His gaze rested on a far wall, and a faint scowl creased his lips.

'What's that sound?' the primarch asked.

'I hear nothing but the drums, sire. Please, we must leave at once.'

'You don't hear that?' Lorgar glanced at his two remaining sons. 'Neither of you?' Their silence answered for them, and Lorgar reached a hand to his forehead. 'Is that… laughter?'

Ingethel was on her knees now, dragging at his robes, weeping in her worship. 'The ritual… The gods come… It is not complete…'

Lorgar paid her heed at last, though the distant look never left his eyes. 'I hear them. I hear them all. Like the memory of laughter. The forgotten faces of distant kin when one struggles to recall them.'

Argel Tal clashed the swords of red iron together; the *skish-skash* of metal on metal loud enough to draw the primarch's attention.

'*Sire,*' he growled, 'we must leave.'

Lorgar shook his head, infinitely patient, infinitely calm. 'It is no longer our choice to make. Events are in motion. Stand away from the Custodian, my son.'

'But sire…'

'Ingethel speaks the truth. This was all ordained. The storm that stranded us. The screams that summoned us. The fear that led Vendatha to betray us. All part of a… a plan. It's so clear to me. The dreams. The whispers. Decade after decade after decade of…'

'Sire, *please.*'

Lorgar's statuesque features were warped by a sudden rush of fury. 'Stand away from that treacherous dog before you join him on an eleventh spear. Do you understand me? This moment is a crucible upon which all else spins. Obey me, or I will kill you where you stand.'

A shadow passed over Argel Tal's sight – something terrible in aspect, something winged and wrathful beyond mortal imagining.

The moment passed. The darkness receded. Argel Tal did as Lorgar commanded, stepping away from the body and sheathing the swords of red iron.

'No answers are worth this,' the captain said.

Neither Xaphen nor Lorgar met his glare. With keen eyes, both watched the ritual proceeding again.

HERE, LORGAR STOPPED writing. His smile was enriched by melancholy.

'Do you believe I sinned in that moment?'

Argel Tal laughed, the sound black and bitter. 'A sin is decided when mortal morality meets a code of ethics. Did you sin against a faith? No. Did you stain your soul? Perhaps.'

'But you hate me, my son. I hear it in your voice.'

'I think desperation blinded you, father. You may take no joy in sadism, but your need for the truth drove you to viciousness.'

'And for this, you hate me.' Lorgar was no longer smiling. His tone was low and barbed, while his eyes had all the warmth of a body on the battlefield.

'I hate what you've forced me to see. I hate the truth we must bring to the Imperium of Man. Above all, I hate what I've become in service to your vision.'

Argel Tal grinned the grin that wasn't his own. 'But we could never hate you, Lorgar.'

VENDATHA WAS STILL alive when they impaled him alongside the other nine sacrifices.

But, mercifully, not for long.

He never saw the consecration bought with his blood. He never saw what breached the barrier between the realm of spirit and the world of flesh.

INGETHEL'S WRITHING DANCE came to an end. The maiden was bathed in sweat, her hair in greasy ringlets and her body shining in the firelight as if beaded with pearls. In her hands, she still gripped her wooden staff, the head carved in a curving crescent moon.

A tattooed god-talker stood before each of the occupied spears, blood from the slaughtered victims gathered into crude clay bowls that were clutched in white-knuckled hands. As Ingethel approached each in turn, the shaman would mark her flesh with a spiralling symbol, tracing blood onto her body with a fingertip.

It was impossible to miss the significance. They were drawing the Eye on her.

'Incredible,' said Lorgar. He looked pained – the veins in his temples swollen and pulsing.

'I know this ritual,' Xaphen said. 'I know it from the old books.'

'Yes,' the primarch gave a strained smile. 'This is an echo of an ancient Colchisian ceremony. Kingpriests – the rulers of old – were appointed like this. The maiden's dance; the blood sacrifices; the constellations inked upon her flesh… All of it. Kor Phaeron would know it, as would Erebus. Both of them will have seen it before, with their own eyes, performed by the Covenant in the years before my arrival on Colchis.'

Argel Tal had considered their culture far beyond such decadence. Lorgar must have picked up on his disgusted thought, because the primarch turned to him with a sharp glance.

'I do not perceive this as beautiful, Argel Tal. Merely necessary. You believe we have progressed past such superstition? I remind you that not all change is for the better. Buildings erode. Flesh weakens. Memories fade. These are all part of time's progression, and all would be reversed, if a way could be found to do so.'

'We are here to seek evidence for the existence of gods, sire. No gods worthy of worship could demand this of their followers.'

Lorgar turned back to the ceremony, massaging his temples. 'Those, my son, are the wisest words anyone has spoken since we found this world. The answers I am finding have dismayed me. Torture? Human sacrifice?' The primarch's features drew into a slow wince. 'Forgive me, I ramble. My mind aches. I wish they would stop laughing.'

The cavern echoed with the thunder of drums, and the air trembled with monotone chanting from hundreds of human throats.

'No one is laughing, sire,' said Argel Tal.

Lorgar turned a pitying smile on his son. 'Yes, they are. You'll see. It will not be long now.'

Ingethel came to the last god-talker. The shaman anointed her with Vendatha's blood, outlining the Serrated Sun constellation on her bare stomach. With this last deed done, the maiden made her way back to the centre of the platform. There she stood, arms reaching out from her sides, head thrown back, crucified upon the very air.

The drumming intensified, a dragon's heartbeat thudding harder and faster as it slipped from its rhythm. The chanting became shouted laments, with hands and faces raised to the rock ceiling.

Ingethel's bare feet slowly left the ground. Blood was running down her legs in staining trails, dripping from her toes to the stone. The Cadians screamed. All of them, every single one, screamed. The captain's helm dimmed its audio receptors to compensate, but it made no difference.

Lorgar closed his eyes, fingertips still at his temples.

'Here it comes.'

ITS ARRIVAL WAS heralded first by the reek of blood. Unbelievably potent, as rich and sour as spoiled wine, it flooded Argel Tal's senses with enough violence to make him gag. Xaphen turned away and Lorgar's eyes remained closed – Argel Tal alone saw what happened next.

Ingethel, risen above the ground in weightless crucifixion, died a dozen deaths in mere moments. Invisible forces excoriated her, flaying her skin away in ragged strips, letting them fall with wet slaps onto the stone below. Blood flowed from her mouth, her eyes, her ears and nose; from every entrance and exit in her body. She endured this for a handful of seconds, until what remained of her simply ruptured. Her musculature burst, showering the primarch and his sons with human meat and lifeblood.

Her skeleton, still articulated, remained before them for a moment more – only to splinter and shatter with the sound of smashing pottery. Bone chips cracked off Argel Tal's armour, clacking like hailstones.

The maiden's staff clattered to the ground.

Lorgar, said the creature taking form amidst the dead girl's wreckage.

LORGAR PLACED THE quill on the parchment and closed his eyes – a reflection of that moment in the cavern: months ago to Argel Tal, only a handful of nights ago to the primarch himself.

'I curse the truth we have discovered,' he confessed. 'I curse the fact that we have reached the edge of reality, only for hatred and damnation to stare back at us from the abyss.'

'The truth is often ugly. It is why people believe lies. Deception offers them something beautiful.'

The creature that was and wasn't Argel Tal continued its recitation.

THE PRIMARCH OPENED his eyes and looked upon the face of the future.

It towered above them all, taller even than Lorgar, and regarded them with mismatched eyes above an open maw. The Cadian

worshippers were so silent, so still, that the Word Bearers were no longer sure any other beings remained alive in the cavern.

Tactical data streamed across Argel Tal's eye lenses as his targeting sensors cycled in frantic inability to lock onto the creature. Each attempted lock drew an invalid response. Where his retinal view would always display analyses of an enemy's armour and anatomy, a Colchisian rune now blinked *Unknown, Unknown, Unknown* across his eyes.

Xaphen voiced the same problem. 'I can't lock onto it. It's… not there.'

Oh, I am here.

'Did you hear that?' the Chaplain asked. Argel Tal nodded, though his audio receptors had tracked no changes at all.

He disengaged the magnetic clamp sealing his bolter to his thigh, and aimed it the creature. He flinched when a golden hand rested on the weapon, lowering it to the floor.

'No,' Lorgar whispered. The primarch's eyes shined. With the threat of tears? Argel Tal wasn't sure.

Lorgar, the creature said again. The primarch met the thing's unbalanced stare.

Four arms curled from its slender torso, each ending in a clawed hand. Its lower body was the mating of serpent and worm, ripe with thick veins in the grey flesh. Its face was almost entirely given over to its open jaws, with selachimorphic teeth in disorderly rows.

A biological impossibility. An evolutionary lie.

It was never still, never motionless, even for a moment. Veins throbbed beneath its discoloured skin, betraying its pulse, and its talons were constantly opening and closing. Only one of its four hands remained closed: gripping Ingethel's ritual staff in a clawed fist.

One eye was sunken, dark and buried in a face of filthy fur. The other: swollen fit to burst, and the sickening orange of a dying sun.

Nothing remained of the maiden. What reared up before them on its coiled lower body was utterly beyond notions of gender.

I am Ingethel the Ascended, it said, and its silent voice was a hundred murmurs all at once. Argel Tal found his eyes drawn to the curved spines of blackened bone that arced out from the thing's shoulder blades.

Wings, he thought. *Wings of black bone.*

Yes. Wings. Humanity forever lies to itself about angels. The truth is ugly. Lies are beautiful. So mankind makes the gods' messengers beautiful. No fear, then. Lovely lies. White wings.

'You are not an angel,' Argel Tal spoke aloud.

And you are not the first Colchisians to reach this world. Khaane. Tezen. Slanat. Narag. All ventured here, millennia ago, guided by visions of angels.

'You are *not* an angel,' Argel Tal repeated, clenching his bolter tighter.

Angels do not exist. They have never existed. But I bring the word of the gods, as angels must do. Look for the core of truth at the heart of humanity's lies. You will see me. My kind. Angels. The creature blinked. Its swollen eye wouldn't allow it, but its black pebble of an orb vanished for a moment under wet, wrinkled flesh.

Angels. Daemons. Just words. Just words.

Lorgar stepped forward at last. To Argel Tal's eyes, he seemed naked without a crozius in his hands.

'How do you know me?'

You are the Chosen. You are the Favoured Son of the Powers.Your name has echoed across our realm since time immemorial, carried on the winds by the shrieks of the neverborn.

'I do not understand what you are saying.'

But you will. There are lessons to be taught. Things that must be shown. I will guide you. One lesson comes first.

The creature, Ingethel, gestured two of its claws – one at Xaphen, the other at Argel Tal.

Your sons, Lorgar. Give me their lives.

'You ask a great deal of me,' said Lorgar. 'You plead for my trust and for the souls of my sons, yet I owe you nothing. You are a spirit, a daemon; superstition born from nightmare and incarnated into flesh.'

All the while, Lorgar walked around the creature. He showed no fear, no trepidation. Argel Tal recognised the faint tension in the primarch's fingers. The Urizen ached to wield the crozius that, for now, was not at his side.

You know of the Primordial Truth. You know that a secret lies behind the stars. You know this is not a godless galaxy. The very gods you seek are the Powers that sent me to you.

Lorgar's angelic countenance twisted into a patient smile. 'Or I could speak a single word to my sons, and their weapons would end this conjuror's trick.'

Ingethel's jaw quivered, its fangs clicking together in a grotesque failure of symmetry. Argel Tal had seen the expression on its face before, written on the wide-eyed, shivering visages of trapped vermin.

Your blood-sons could not end me.

'They have ended everything else the galaxy has thrown at them.' The primarch made no pretence at hiding his pride. Argel Tal and Xaphen raised their bolters in perfect unison, both warriors sighting down the gun barrels at the creature's eyes.

I bring the answers you have sought all your life. If you wish to awaken humanity to enlightenment, if you wish to be the architect of the faith that will save mankind, I—

'Enough posturing. Tell me why you must take my sons from me.'

It moved in a blur, its serpentine tail leaving a smear of residue the thickness of treacle along the stone. One moment, the creature stood in the centre of the platform, the next it slithered before Lorgar, staring down at the primarch.

Lorgar didn't recoil. He merely looked up at the creature.

The Great Eye. I will guide them into the storm, into the realm of the Powers. That is the first step, written in fate's own hand. They will return with answers. They will return as the weapons you require. Your time will come, Lorgar. But the Powers call for your sons, and I will guide them to where they must go.

'I would not sacrifice them for answers.'

Ingethel's jaw clicked as it trembled. Its laughter was little more than verminous chittering.

Do you believe that? Nothing matters more to you than the truth. The Powers know their son's heart. They know what you will do before it is done. If you desire enlightenment, you will take this first step.

'If I agree to this… will you harm them?'

Ingethel turned its bestial head to the side, watching the two warriors with its inhuman eyes.

Yes.

THE DECISION WAS not to be made lightly.

As he was wont to do, the primarch retreated into seclusion, away from the distractions of fleet management, away from the menial responsibilities that came with soldiering, and remained in the caverns beneath Cadia's surface.

Argel Tal and Xaphen returned to their Thunderhawk at the modest landing site, finding they had much to say to one another and little will to speak it. While the Chaplain voxed a scant, vague update to the ships in orbit, Argel Tal took the task of appraising Aquillon of the situation over a secure vox-channel.

Almost an hour later, the captain descended the gang ramp, standing once more on the desolate plains, watching the sky with its shroud of rippling violet.

Incarnadine, ever the silent watchman, stood as an imposing sentinel nearby. Argel Tal saluted, but the robot made no response. Next to the automaton, Xi-Nu 73 emitted a blurt of irritated machine-code. Something in his data readings apparently vexed him. At that point in time, the Word Bearer couldn't have cared less.

When Xaphen joined him at last, Argel Tal had a hard time meeting his brother's eyes. He placed his armoured boot on one of the swollen, twelve-legged beetles that scurried over the wastelands, killing it with a moist, crackling crunch.

'What lies did you weave for the Eyes of the Emperor?' asked the Chaplain.

'A long and detailed tale that tasted foul to even speak. A Cadian sect attacked us out of bitterness, and Ven was lost with Deumos, Tsar Quorel and Rikus.'

'Did they die like heroes?'

'Oh, undoubtedly. Songs will be sung and legends forever told of their most noble ends.' He spat acid onto the ground.

Xaphen gave a mirthless snort, and they fell silent.

The two Astartes watched the stained sky, neither wishing to be the first to broach the next subject. Ultimately, it was Argel Tal that ventured there first.

'We've split the Legion and sailed to the galaxy's edges, only to find… this. The Old Ways of Colchis *were* right. Daemons. Blood sacrifice. Spirits made flesh. All of it is real. Now Aurelian lingers in the darkness, sharing words with that creature, deciding whether to sell our souls for even uglier answers. If this is enlightenment, brother… perhaps ignorance is bliss.'

Xaphen turned from the burning sky. 'We have defied the Emperor to find these truths – defied the spirit of his decrees, even if we obeyed the letter of the law. Now a Custodian lies dead, and Imperial blades have shed Imperial blood. There can be no going back from this. You know what the primarch will decide.'

Argel Tal thought back to Vendatha's words: *'The choice you offer is no choice at all.'*

'It will break his heart to do it,' the captain said, 'but he will send us into the Eye.'

SIXTEEN

Orfeo's Lament
The Storm Beyond the Glass
Chaos

THE VESSEL CHOSEN was *Orfeo's Lament.* A sleek, vicious light cruiser captained most ably by the famously tenacious Janus Sylamor. When the primarch's decree had reached the 1,301st, Sylamor had volunteered the *Lament* before Lorgar's vox-distorted voice had even finished the traditional blessings that ended his fleet-wide addresses.

Her first officer took a dimmer view of her eagerness, pointing out that this was the largest, most devastating warp storm ever recorded in the history of the species. Here was an anomaly with all the force of the legendary storms that severed humanity's worlds from one another in the centuries before the Great Crusade.

Sylamor had clicked her tongue – a habit of hers that always showed her impatience – and told him to shut up. The smile she gave him would only be considered sweet by people that didn't know her very well.

The departure window was set for sunrise over the wastelands, which left practically no time for preparation beyond the core necessities. Grey gunships graced the *Lament*'s modest landing bay, delivering squad after squad of dark-armoured Astartes. Storage chambers were cleared to house the Word Bearers, their ammunition crates, their maintenance servitors, as well as the contingent from the Legio Cybernetica that accompanied Seventh Company, led by an irritable tech-adept calling himself Xi-Nu 73.

Introductions were brief. Five Astartes marched onto the bridge, and Sylamor rose from her throne to greet them. Each spoke their name and rank – one captain, one Chaplain, three sergeants – and each saluted her in turn. She responded accordingly, introducing her own command crew.

It was polite but cold, and over in a matter of minutes.

Only when the Astartes remained on the bridge did Sylamor sense a breach in decorum. Unperturbed, the captain continued her final checks, pointing her silver-topped cane to each console station in turn.

'Propulsion.'

'Engines,' replied the first officer, 'aye.'

'Auspex.'

'Aye, ma'am.'

'Void shields.'

'Shields ready.'

'Weapons.'

'Weapons, aye.'

'Geller field.'

'Geller field, aye.'

'Helm.'

'Helm standing ready, ma'am.'

'All stations report full readiness,' she said to the Word Bearers captain. This was something of a lie, and Sylamor hoped her tone didn't betray it. All stations had reported readiness, true, but the last hour had also seen reports of insurrection in the lower decks, put down by lethal force, and one suicide. The ship's astropath had requested to be assigned to another vessel (*'Request denied'*, Sylamor had frowned. *'Who in the Emperor's name does he think he is to even ask such a thing?'*) and the Navigator was engaged in what he referred to as 'intensive mental barricading so as to preserve one's fundamental quintessence', which Sylamor was fairly sure she didn't even want to understand.

So instead of relaying all of this to the towering warlord standing next to her throne, she simply gave him a curt nod and said, 'all stations report readiness'.

The Astartes turned his helm's slanted blue eyes upon her, and nodded.

'There will be one last vessel docking soon. Ensure all of your crew are removed from the bay once it arrives.'

Her raised eyebrow conveyed just what she thought of this unorthodox demand. And in case it didn't, she added her own spice to it. 'Very well. Now tell me why.'

'No,' said one of the other Astartes. He'd named himself as Malnor, a sergeant. 'Just obey the order.'

The captain, Argel Tal, gestured for his brother to remain silent.

'The last gunship will be bringing a creature on board. The fewer of your crew that are exposed to it, the better it will be for all of us.'

The first officer pointedly cleared his throat. Crew members turned in their seats. Sylamor blinked twice. 'I will suffer no xenos presence on board the *Lament*,' she stated.

'I did not say it was an alien,' said Argel Tal. 'I said it was a creature. My warriors will escort it to the bridge. Do not look at it once we are underway. Focus on your duties, all of you. I have my men in the starboard docking bay, and will inform you when the gunship reaches us.'

'Incoming hail from *De Profundis*,' called an officer from the vox-console.

The Word Bearers went to their knees, heads lowered.

'Accept the hail,' Sylamor said. Without realising, she lifted a hand to check her hair was in neat order, and straightened her uniform. Around her, officers did the same, brushing epaulettes and standing straighter.

The occulus tuned into a view of *De Profundis*'s command deck, where the primarch and Fleetmaster Torvus stood in pride of place.

'This is the flagship,' Torvus said, 'Good hunting, *Lament*.'

'Thank you, sir,' Sylamor replied.

An awkward silence reached between both bridge crews, broken by Argel Tal.

'Sire?'

'Yes, my son?' Lorgar's smile was sincere, though vox-crackle ruined his smooth voice.

'We will return with the answers the Legion needs. You have my word,' he gestured to the parchment bound to his shoulder guard, 'and my oath of moment'.

The smile remained upon the primarch's painted lips. 'I know, Argel Tal. Please, rise. I cannot abide you kneeling before me in this moment of moments.'

The Word Bearers rose as ordered, and Argel Tal nodded to Captain Sylamor.

'The last vessel has docked and my warriors are leading the creature to the bridge. Take us in, captain.'

The ship trembled as its engines came alive, and *Orfeo's Lament* speared away from the planet, cutting through the void towards the storm's distant edges.

'Three hours until we reach the storm's outermost border,' one of the helmsmen called.

Argel Tal held his bolter in his fists, waiting for the bridge doors to open once more.

'When the creature arrives, do not look at it.' He seemed to be addressing everyone, while looking at none of them. 'This is not a matter of decorum or politeness. Do not look at it. Do not meet its eyes. Try not to breathe too much of its scent.'

'Is this creature toxic?' asked Sylamor.

'It is dangerous,' the Word Bearer allowed. 'When I say these instructions are for your safety and sanity, I mean those exact words. Do not look at it. Do not even look at its reflection in any screen or monitor. If it speaks, focus on anything but its words. And if you feel nauseous or afflicted in its presence, leave your station at once.'

Sylamor's laugh was patently false. 'You are unnerving my crew, captain.'

'Just do as I ask, please.'

She bristled, not used to being given orders on her own deck. 'Of course, sir.'

'Don't act so offended, Janus.' The Word Bearer forced some warmth into his voice, which his helm's vox-speakers immediately stole and twisted. 'Just trust me.'

When the doors finally opened, the first thing to wash over the bridge was the smell, which caused several of the human crew to gag.

Commendably, only one turned around to see what entered, escorted as it was by a full squad of Word Bearers – and that one soul was Captain Janus Sylamor.

In accidental defiance of the promise she'd made only minutes before, she turned to the opening doors and saw the creature framed in the light of the illumination globes in the corridor behind. The first heave of bitter sick hit her teeth and lips so fast she didn't have time to open her mouth. The rest spread onto the floor as she went down on all fours, purging her stomach of the morning's caffeine and dry rations, and painting the decking with her bile.

'I warned you,' Argel Tal said to her, without taking his eyes from the creature.

Her answer was to heave some more, ending with a string of saliva hanging from her lips.

Ingethel wormed its way onto the bridge, leaving a discoloured smear in its wake. The *tap, tap, tap* of the staff's base on the metal floor acted as accompaniment to the sound of its slick flesh slithering across the deck.

Officers abandoned their posts by the captain's throne, stepping away with undisguised disgust and covering their mouths and noses. More than one vomited into their hands as Ingethel drew nearer, though for the creature's part, it seemed to notice none of this. Its malformed eyes stared dead ahead at the storm taking over the occulus.

Sylamor rose to her feet again, after taking Argel Tal's offered hand.

'What have you brought onto my bridge, captain?'

'It is a guide. Now with the greatest respect, Janus, wipe your mouth and do your duty. Next time, perhaps you will listen to me.'

She was familiar enough with Argel Tal from fleet command meetings to know that this curt treatment wasn't like him at all. Of all the Word Bearer commanders, he'd always been the most approachable, and the most inclined to hear the concerns of the human officers.

She said nothing. Instead, she nodded, breathing through her mouth to hinder some of the obscene reek that only fuelled her nausea. The foulness of the stench wasn't the worst part; it was the familiarity of it.

As a young girl on Colchis, she'd survived an outbreak of rotten lung in her village, and had been one of the few left to witness the arrival of a coven of mortuary priests from the City of Grey Flowers. Over the course of a single day, they'd erected a great pyre to cleanse the dead before scattering their ashes across the desert. The smell of that funeral pyre had never left her, and when it resurfaced now, it was all she could do not to choke at the creature's stench.

A curious *drip, drip, drip* ate at her attention, drawing her glance to the deck by the creature's sluggish body. A greasy, opaque plasm dripped from the muscled folds of its serpentine lower half, bleaching the steel decking where it fell.

'Full speed ahead,' said Sylamor, and swallowed before another purge took hold.

Orfeo's Lament trembled – ever the eager huntress, ever the keen explorer – and increased her pace. The storm swelled in the oculus before them as they cruised closer to its edge.

'Have the flagship's augurs managed to measure the afflicted area of space?' she asked.

Thousands upon thousands of solar systems lie within the Great Eye.

She froze, cheeks paling. 'I… I heard a voice.'

'Ignore it,' ordered Argel Tal.

You could sail your mortal craft for a hundred lifetimes within its depths, and see no more than a shadow of its full glory.

'I can still hear it…'

Argel Tal growled, deep and low, his head tilted towards the creature. 'Do not toy with their lives,' he said. 'You have been warned.'

None of them will survive this journey. You are a fool to believe they will.

'Did… did it just say…'

'It said nothing,' Argel Tal interrupted her stammer. 'Ignore the voice. Focus, Janus. Attend to your duties, and leave all else to us. I will not let the creature harm you, or anyone in the crew.'

She does not believe you.

'Be quiet, false angel.'

She knows you lie. You hear her heartbeat, as I do. She is terrified, and she knows you are lying to her.

Across the bridge, two menials vomited over their consoles. Another fainted at his station, with blood running from his ears in a slow trickle.

'Will this keep happening?' Sylamor asked Argel Tal, careful not to look at the creature over the warrior's shoulder, and hoping her voice wasn't shaking.

The Word Bearer didn't answer immediately. 'I believe so,' came the eventual response.

One of the helmsmen jerked in his seat, cracking his head against the back of the throne. Through clenched teeth, he managed a thin wail before falling into a seizure, kept in place only by his restraint harness.

'Medicae team to the helm,' ordered the captain.

Sylamor's patience was close to its end when one of her adjutant servitors unplugged itself from its post and began to painstakingly crawl across the floor. The servitor in question had no legs below the thighs, having had them surgically removed in order to better remain at its post at all times. When it detached itself from its bronze cradle and started clawing its way over the decking, Captain Sylamor watched this unprecedented behaviour for several stunned moments. The augmetic servant trailed

wires and cables from its spine and severed legs, viscous oil leaking from its nose.

'Blood of the Emperor,' Sylamor cursed under her breath. 'Stand back, everyone. Stand back.'

She put the servitor down herself with a single pistol round to the back of the poor thing's head, and ordered two deckhands to remove it at once.

Vox-officer Arvas turned to his captain as she passed on the way back to her throne. 'Do you hear that?' he asked her.

'A contact? Another vessel?'

'No.' He held his earpiece, face darkened by concentration. 'I can hear him, captain.'

Mounting irritation overrode her unease. 'Hear *who?*'

Janus had known Arvas for over a decade, and on one night in particular four years ago, she'd known him – and four bottles of silver Yndonesic wine – regrettably well. Despite that lone indiscretion, he was one of her most adept and loyal crew members. 'Tell me who you hear, lieutenant.'

He tried to retune his console, twisting a row of dials. 'I can hear Vanic dying. He screams, but not for long. The rest is white noise. Listen,' he offered her his earpiece. 'You can hear Vanic dying. You hear him scream, but not for long.'

She hesitantly reached to take the earpiece. Standing next to Arvas, Vox-officer Vanic gave her an attempt at a smile. Discomfort was written across his fat features.

Arvas unholstered his sidearm and pumped four rounds into the other man's stomach. Blood, stinging and hot, flecked Sylamor's face as Vanic collapsed screaming to the deck.

'*Now* you hear it,' said Arvas.

The captain had no time to react – a blur of dark grey shoved her aside. Before she'd even blinked, Arvas was kicking and dangling above the ground, held aloft by Argel Tal's fist around his throat. The ship shivered around them as if it shared the crew's disquiet.

As he was strangled in the warrior's grip, Arvas's fingers scraped across Argel Tal's faceplate with all the ferocity of a cor-

nered beast hoping to scratch out its killer's eyes. Sweat-smears painted across the eye lenses.

The medicae team reached Vanic's side in time for him to die at their feet. Arvas had been right – Vanic hadn't screamed for long.

The Word Bearer ignored the fingers scrabbling over the implacable ceramite, and turned to address his warriors. 'Dagotal, take this wretch to the containment cells.' He passed Arvas towards the other Word Bearers, sending him sprawling with a shove.

Another of the Astartes stepped forward, catching the struggling officer by the collar and lifting him from the ground. Arvas took over where Vanic's screams left off.

'And render him silent,' Argel Tal added.

'By your word, brother.' Dagotal gripped the officer's neck, squeezing his windpipe with gentle force. The human's voice faded to a gasping squeak as the Word Bearer hauled him from the bridge.

Captain Sylamor glared up at the towering figure of Argel Tal.

'That creature cannot remain on my bridge. It is… doing something to us, isn't it?'

'I do not know.'

'Then *ask it*.'

'We will take it to the observation deck, captain. Ensure your crew vacate the area, as well as the corridors between. Make full speed for the storm's edge. I will contact you with any alterations to those orders if the need arises.'

'Thank you,' she said to him.

Argel Tal returned a curt nod, and moved back to his brethren.

'You should have killed the murderer,' Xaphen admonished.

'He will stand trial for his sin. It could be argued that his actions were not his own.' Argel Tal turned to watch Ingethel as the creature began its slithering withdrawal from the command deck. They followed, avoiding the slick trail it left in its wake.

'We are walking into the unknown, and there is nothing but darkness before my eyes,' Argel Tal said to his Chaplain.

'And that worries you.'

'Of course it worries me. If we are on the precipice of enlightenment, why have I never felt so blind?'

'Everything is darkest,' Xaphen mused, 'before the dawn.'

'That, my brother, is an axiom that sounds immensely profound until you realise it's a lie.'

THE OBSERVATION DECKS on most Imperial ships were places of great serenity. Although *Orfeo's Lament* was a modest vessel compared to *De Profundis*, let alone the grandeur of the *Fidelitas Lex*, Argel Tal still felt his breath catch as he entered.

Midway along the cruiser's battlemented spine rose an armoured dome, its clear surface offering an unparalleled view of the surrounding void. In normal space, the view of a billion stars in the infinite night never failed to capture his imagination – and, he'd admit in his prouder moments, his ambition as well. These were humanity's stars. No other species had the right to claim them, for their ages had come and gone. The future was one of purity, and it belonged to mankind.

Here, now, the stars were stained violet. Argel Tal watched distant suns drown in curling, thrashing mists of purple and red.

Do you see?

Ingethel had reared up to its full unnatural height, four stick-thin arms spread in benediction to the burning heavens. From jaws that couldn't close, it spat out a rattlesnake's hiss.

Do. You. See.

Argel Tal tore his gaze from the night sky. The observation deck was spacious, fitted with Spartan furniture that none of the Word Bearers were using. Each remained standing, bolters clutched in their hands.

'I see a storm,' said the captain. 'Nothing more.'

'You and I both, sir.' This, from Dagotal. The outrider sergeant had arrived several minutes after the rest of them, coming straight from the containment block where he'd left Lieutenant Arvas in the less than tender care of the brig officers. 'I feel something, though. The ship's shaking itself apart.'

'Always thought I'd die in battle,' grumbled Malnor.

Argel Tal shook his head. 'You dragged us into this nexus of energies, Ingethel. It is time to tell us why. What are we supposed to be seeing?'

The truth. The truth behind the stars. The hidden layer of the universe.

'I see a storm that threatens to kill us all, comprised of a thousand colours.'

No. You see target locks and biological data streams. You see the world before you through filtering lenses. You stand on the border of heaven, Word Bearer. Remove your helm. Look upon the home of the gods with your true eyes.

It took him a moment to comply, hesitating at the thought of the creature's smell assaulting his olfactory senses without first being purified by his helm's intake grille. He took a final breath of his armour's stale, recycled air, and disengaged the collar seals.

It was worse than he'd imagined, and the bridge crew were to be commended for the fact so few of them vomited. The chamber already reeked of a charnel house; that coppery spice of fouled blood, the stinging meat-stink of digestive organs bared to the air.

'I still see nothing,' Argel Tal grunted. 'I see the storm.'

You cannot lie to me as you lie to the humans. Stare into the clashing tides around us. Do you see what stares back?

The captain stepped closer to the dome's edge, peering out into the roiling void, where the playing energies mixed and swirled. The ship gave another tremor at the mercy of the forceful tides. There, just a for a moment, as the ship shook…

You saw. Your heart quickened. Your eyes dilated. You saw.

Argel Tal stroked his hand along the dense glass wall, staring into the tumult beyond. How could one draw meaning from this madness? The ship shuddered in the aetheric tides again, and once more the riotous energies coalesced for the briefest moment.

A human face, spoiled by frightened eyes and a screaming mouth, formed from the burning matter outside the glass. It

burst against the dome, dissipating back into the raging tides from whence it came.

Do you know what this storm is?

Argel Tal wouldn't look away from the tides. 'It's warp energy. The aetheric current, reaching through into the material universe. Imperial records have chronicled the presence of alien creatures in the warp itself, but they are catalogued among the lesser xenos threats.'

Ingethel's hiss echoed in his mind. How verminous, the creature's laughter.

Do you know what those words mean? Or do you relate lore poured into your mind by the indoctrinations that shaped you? What do you see when you stare into this storm?

The Word Bearer turned to Ingethel. A face that would have been handsome – had it not suffered the trials of Astartes surgery – stared up at the creature. 'This is the galaxy's blood. Reality is bleeding.'

Close. The daemon-thing chittered with a rodent's delight. *Humanity is precious in its ignorance, but that cannot be allowed to last if your species is to survive. The warp is more than a realm for mortal vessels to cut into with impunity, and use its tides to sail faster than light.*

What you are seeing is creation's own shadow, where every mortal emotion and urge takes immortal form. You are sailing through seas made of psychic energy and liquefied sorrow. You are cast adrift in the heaven and hell of a million mythologies, Argel Tal.

This is where every moment of hatred, disgust, wrath, joy, grief, jealousy, indolence and decadence manifest as raw energy.

This is where the souls of the dead come to burn forever.

Orfeo's Lament gave a horrendous shudder, and the sound of wrenching metal ran through the deck beneath them. Torgal and Xaphen went to their knees – the former with a gutter curse, the latter with an indignant grunt.

In the storm beyond, more images took shape. Hands pressed against the glass, leaving discoloured smears. Faces, warped by screams, aching in their familiarity. The shadow of something,

something vast and dark and cold behind it all, sweeping past the ship like a whale passing in the deepest ocean.

For a moment, Argel Tal's breath misted in the air. Frost beaded his skin. The shadow passed, and kept passing, disturbing the crashing energies with its immense, half-formed bulk.

A void leviathan. Fear would draw it closer, and this vessel would disintegrate in its jaws. But it passes, hunting other prey. In many of the futures I saw, it turned upon us, and your lives ended here. In three of those futures, Argel Tal, you were laughing as you died, dissolving in the energies outside the ship.

He was not laughing now.

'This is hell.' Argel Tal no longer struggled to see the faces shrieking in at him, nor the hands clawing at the glass. He could see nothing else. 'This is the underworld of human imagination.'

Do not be blinded by dogma. This is the Primordial Truth. Creation's shadow. The layer behind the stars.

The Word Bearer breathed a single word as he watched the sea of screaming souls beyond.

'Chaos.'

The daemon's maw twisted into a grin. *Now you begin to understand.*

ARGEL TAL SIPPED the water. It was brackish on his tongue, and distastefully warm. It was also the fifth such cup to sour in his hands like this, and he had the unsettling notion that it was his own body curdling the water.

'We soon reached the first world,' he said. 'Melisanth. The world had no human name, but in ancient days, the eldar-breed xenos… they named it Melisanth.'

Lorgar's flowing script recorded each word. 'The eldar? What is their role in all this?'

'Now? They have no role. They are the galaxy's memory, fading night by night. But once, this region of space was their most precious dominion – the heart of their empire. Their decadence brought us forth, from our realm into this one. We watched their worlds burning in spectral fire, and we tore their souls apart in claws of spirit and flesh.'

'Argel Tal.'

'Every sensation was new to us. We were newborns in the material realm. Blood fed us. Pain fuelled us. You cannot know what it is like to grow stronger when a creature suffers nearby. To swell with power when parents watch their children burn. To grow in size and intellect with each sin you inflict upon mortal flesh. To know more of the universe's secrets with each soul you swallow.'

'My son… Please.'

'But I was there, Lorgar. I saw these things. I did these things.'

'You are Argel Tal. You were born on Colchis, in the village of Singh-Rukh, to a carpenter and a seamstress. Your name means "the last angel" in the dialect of the southern steppes tribes. You are the youngest warrior in the Legion ever to inherit the mantle of company captain. You once bore swords of red iron – the blades of your predecessor – which you lost in service to your primarch. You are Argel Tal, a Bearer of the Word. You are my son.'

The Word Bearer looked down at his skeletal hands. 'Sire,' he said softly. 'Forgive me.' Argel Tal managed to meet his primarch's eyes, infinitely grateful that he saw no judgement in those grey depths.

'There is nothing to forgive.'

'You knew more of my life than I realised.'

Lorgar smiled. 'All of my sons are precious to me.'

Argel Tal rubbed at his sore eyes. 'Ingethel told us that our changes would begin at the ordained time, when the galaxy burns. But I am losing myself now. Is this the ordained moment already? Is the galaxy aflame? None of my memories are my own, father. There's a copper taste on my tongue, like the echo of blood. Perhaps this is fear. Perhaps this taste is the fear so many poets and archivists have written about.' The captain laughed, the sound hollow and humourless. 'And now I speak my valediction.'

'It need not be a valediction, Argel Tal. That cannot be decided until the tale is told.'

SEVENTEEN

A Dead Empire
Revelations
Genesis

INGETHEL GESTURED AT the planet with a crooked claw.

They called it Melisanth. It was one of the last to feel the Eye's spreading influence.

'Auspex confirms no life readings, even down to the bacterial level,' Captain Sylamor's voice rasped over the vox.

'She really needed to scan to see that?' Torgal asked.

Below them was the ghost of a world – a globe of black oceans and grey landscapes, inexpertly guarded by thin cloud hazes. Even in orbit above Melisanth, the ship was buffeted by the warp-winds outside, while the observation dome endured the liquid, a tidal press of human faces and figures bursting against the reinforced glass. Each one splashed over the shielding with oil-on-water incandescence, flowing back into the maelstrom as soon as it destroyed itself.

After a while, Argel Tal started to see the same faces reappear. They seemed to be reforming out there in the winds and hurling themselves at the ship over and over again.

'Are they souls?' he asked aloud.

It is primordial matter. In the realm of flesh and blood, it manifests as psychic energy. Your thoughts give it shape. You see human souls, but it is so much more. Eldar souls. The flesh of the neverborn, that humanity once named daemonkind. Raw psychic currents. Possibility incarnate, when the mind shapes reality.

'I want to walk the surface of that world.'

You will die.

Argel Tal rounded on the creature, anger marring his unscarred features. 'Then why drag us here? What is the purpose of this journey if we cannot leave the ship? To stare at dead worlds from behind our Geller Field? To listen to the shrieking of lost souls?'

Ingethel slithered closer to the gathered Word Bearers. The black-wood staff, once carried by the maiden who sacrificed herself to bring the daemon into being, tapped on the decking like an old man's walking cane.

Such things I have to show you.

It gestured two gnarled claws at the world below. *There is no lesson in Melisanth as it is. You must see Melisanth as it was.*

Close your eyes. Hear the storm outside. Listen to the tide breaking against your vessel's skin.

Melisanth is but one world floating in the Sea of Souls. One amongst millions. Let me show it to you.

And then, no more than a heartbeat later – *Open your eyes, Argel Tal.*

HE'D ALWAYS TREASURED sunrise.

This one, an ocherous orb painting fierce light over a city of spires and minarets, was one to remember. Even with pain tolerance and resistance to light saturation written into his genetic code, the rising sun was bright enough to make his eyes ache. And that was beautiful too, for it had never happened before.

Ingethel was nowhere to be seen. They stood on a cliff's edge, above an alien city turned golden by the dawn. Argel Tal turned to see his brothers: Xaphen, watching the xenos colony; Malnor and Torgal with him; Dagotal, staring up into the blue sky.

This was Melisanth, came the creature's burbling voice in his mind. *See the city made of bone and gemstones. See the spires too delicate for mortal physics to support them, standing only because of eldar witchcraft.*

Now see the Fall.

In the sky above, the clouds raced in a cyclical dance – day and night flashing past in a blur of flickering grey. Tendrils of violet clawed across the heavens, thickening, linking, coiling, staining

the air with red mist. Sweat broke out on Argel Tal's face and neck in the savage heat. It warmed even the aqueous moisture that lubricated his eyes.

As he watched, the city below began to tumble, its spires and walkways falling to shatter on the ground, crushing crowds of slender alien figures and demolishing lesser buildings beneath.

Their sorceries are fading. This is on the edge of the Great Eye. The destruction took days to unfold on these lesser colonies. At the core of their empire, all life was ended in mere moments.

Argel Tal could hear the city dying, the sounds of thunder, sorrow and lamentation carried up to him on the wind.

'Aliens,' Xaphen smiled at the toppling towers. 'May they all burn, soulless and forgotten.'

None of the others disagreed. 'Why did this happen?' asked Argel Tal.

The eldar were close to seeing the truth of the universe. Their civilisation spanned the galaxy, evolving for millennia under the guidance and worship of their gods. And then, at the last step… they faltered.

'How?'

Look to the sky.

The storm clouds gathered in a threatening spiral, darkening the land to every horizon. From the very first raindrops – hot on the skin and rich in their metallic reek – it was clear what was in store for the city below. With a single peal of thunder, loud enough to vibrate the air itself, the blackened clouds ground together and signalled the opening of the heavens.

Sheets of scarlet rained from the sky, showering the broken city in blood so thick it stained the bone structures that still remained standing. Xaphen closed his eyes, lifting his face to the downpour.

'This is not human blood. It's too sweet.'

Argel Tal wiped his face clear of the raining gore. In the city below, creatures were melting from the shadows of fallen monuments, rising from the lakes of blood that were forming in the streets. They staggered and sprinted, each one uneven and unnatural in its own half-formed way. Some crawled on a multi-

tude of boneless limbs. Others wailed as they dashed on spindly legs, reaching out with curling claws.

My kin, taking physical form. They hunt souls, and flesh, and blood and bone.

'Why is this happening?'

The malformed beasts ran in packs, dragging down any of the slender, weeping survivors they found. The sight left him cold. Genocide should be a purification, and there was nothing of purity in this insane unleashing of unknowable powers.

'Answer me,' Argel Tal said softly. No answer came, beyond the blood running down his cheeks and over his lips. He could smell nothing else, taste nothing else, beyond the sanguine rain.

New towers rose from the tumbling city below – slender spires formed from pulsing walls of still-living flesh, decorated by voiceless faces and flayed arms stretching from the architecture. The rising towers reached for the panicking eldar in the streets, using their lives as raw material, their alien flesh as living mortar.

Watch them die. You would die the same way.

'I told you to answer me,' said the Word Bearer.

Watch and learn, Word Bearer.

'We have records of the eldar and their histories.' He spat the foul blood that kept running onto his tongue. 'They speak of the Fall, when decadence and sin bred corruption throughout their culture. A spiritual cataclysm annihilated them centuries ago. That devastation is *this?* This… divine wrath?'

This is their judgement. In their ignorance, they see only the death of an empire as countless worlds drown in blood and fire. In this moment of ascension, the eldar choose terror over power, and damn their kingdom to ashes because the Primordial Truth frightens them all.

They have given birth to a god. A god of pleasure and promise. Yet they feel no joy.

'Enough!' Argel Tal threw back his head and drew breath into his three lungs. The storm intensified, its tortured skies bleeding onto the world below.

'Answer me!' he screamed at the sky.

This is the Fall they speak of in whispered tones. The eldar were blind. They could have lived in harmonic union with the Powers, as humanity must soon learn themselves. Instead, they are dying. Unable to accept the Primordial Truth, they are being destroyed by it.

You ask why? Can you not see why? This is not how empires die, Word Bearer. This is how gods are born. The eldar faith has given the galaxy a new deity. She Who Thirsts. Slaa Neth. It has a thousand names.

These are its first moments of life, and it wakes to find its own worshippers are abandoning it, out of ignorance and fear.

This endless storm, this Eye of Terror, is the echo of its birth-cries.

'I have seen enough,' Argel Tal watched the city below, now silent, flooded, reaped clean of all life. 'Blood of the gods, I have seen enough.'

Then open your eyes.

INGETHEL WAS WATCHING them, its mismatched eyes unblinking as they reflected the sick light from beyond the dome. The stench of blood lingered in Argel Tal's nostrils, despite the warriors' pristine armour and clean skin.

'That was unpleasant,' said Torgal.

'Sir,' Dagotal reached for Argel Tal's shoulder guard. 'I think we should leave this place.'

It was Xaphen, not the daemon, that quelled such discussion. 'You overstep your authority, sergeant. We will not flee from the truths we've travelled so far to find.'

Argel Tal ignored their bickering. His vox-network was alive with squads checking in, retinal runes flickering as each sergeant linked to him.

'Sir, we just saw…'

'Captain, there was a voice and… and a vision…'

'This is Vadox Squad, reporting…'

The Word Bearer turned to the daemon. 'Every one of my warriors on the ship saw what we saw.'

They hear my voice, the same as you. That is why they are here: to bear witness. To learn. The eldar failed, and the price paid for their sin

was slow extinction. Humanity must not follow the same path. Mankind must accept the Primordial Truth.

'We cannot carry this message back to the Imperium,' said Argel Tal.

'Of course we can,' Xaphen narrowed his eyes. 'We can and we will, because we must. This is humanity's enlightenment.'

You came here seeking to learn if your home world's Old Ways were true. And now you know they were.

'This is a truth too ugly to be embraced by the Imperium.' The captain watched the dead world below. 'You, creature, know nothing of what you speak. But brother, do you expect us to sail into orbit around Terra and right into the Emperor's welcoming embrace? The answers we carry home will make a lie of the Imperial Truth. All human emotion takes form as psychic force? Not only is the Emperor's godless vision a lie, it must be crushed in favour of allying with daemons and spirits?' Argel Tal shook his head. 'It will be civil war, Xaphen. The Imperium will tear itself apart.'

The Chaplain gave a threatening growl. 'This is why we came. The truth is all that matters. You speak as though you expected the primarch to be proved wrong, and panic now he was shown to be right.'

'But the captain has a point,' said Dagotal. 'We will not be showered with medals for bringing home the truth that hell is a real place.'

They all turned as the daemon laughed in their minds.

You have seen nothing yet, but you already judge what is best for your species?

'What more is there to see?' asked Argel Tal.

Ingethel beckoned with its gnarled fingers. *Close your eyes.*

'No.' The captain took a calming breath. 'I am finished with blind indulgence. Tell me what you wish to show us.'

I will show you how your primarch was born. I will show you why the Cadians called him the Favoured Son of the Four. The Emperor is not his only father.

Argel Tal glanced at the others, seeing their eyes already closed, the mention of their father enough to tempt them into obedience. He spoke into the vox, alerting the other squads.

'Be ready, all of you, for what we see may be a deception.'

You have such little faith, Argel Tal.

The Word Bearer closed his eyes again.

THE AIR'S TOUCH was ice against his skin, and the first thing Argel Tal's returning vision offered was his own breath misting before him. The smell here was neither the sanguine richness of the alien world, nor the musky odour of oxygen filtered through a vessel's recycling scrubbers. A certain sharpness hung in the air: the chemical tang of volatile machinery and burning glass.

Argel Tal looked around the laboratory, surrounded on all sides by live generators, cluttered tables and humans at work in pressurised environment suits – some white, some bright yellow and marked by radiological sigils. Frost rimed their faceplates, scuffing away as powder when brushed off by gloved hands.

The Word Bearer had been in scarce few laboratories in the many decades of his existence, so his frame of reference was limited. Still, he could form a fair estimation that a facility this size would only be required for the most vital or visionary work. The walls were lost behind dense cabling and clanking generators; the technicians at work numbered in the hundreds, spread around tables, platforms and desks.

One passed Argel Tal, the figure's environmental hazard suit rustling as it brushed the Word Bearer's battle armour. The suit's faceguard stole any hope of seeing the wearer's face; either way, the technician ignored the Astartes completely.

Argel Tal reached for the figure.

Don't.

He hesitated, grey fingers curling back. The tiny servos in his armour's knuckles whirred as he pulled away from the technician's shoulder.

Be careful, Argel Tal. These souls remain blind to you as long as you do not interfere with their work.

'And if I did?' he asked quietly.

Then one of the most powerful psychic forces in the history of life would be alerted to you, and would kill you where you stand. You are within the Anathema's innermost sanctum. Here, it breeds its spawn.

'The Anathema,' Argel Tal repeated, looking around the colossal facility. The other Word Bearers walked to his side, none of them reaching for weapons just yet.

The Anathema. The creature you know as the God-Emperor.

Xaphen exhaled misty curls of vapour. 'This… This is Terra. The Emperor's gene-laboratories.'

Yes. Many years before the Anathema's crusade to reclaim the stars. Here, with the full clarity of its emotionless inhumanity, it has finished shaping its twenty children.

The Chaplain crossed to a table, where vials of blood span in a centrifuge, separating into layers within each glass vial. 'If this is a vision of the past, how could the Emperor destroy us here?'

You are protected for now, Xaphen. That is all that matters. This is what transpires on Terra, as the elder empire burns with soul-fire. The Anathema senses it will soon be time to begin his Great Crusade.

The Word Bearers moved along the rows of tables, their course taking them closer to the central platform standing above the laboratory. A column of black and silver machinery stood upon the decking there, ringed by a wide walkway. Argel Tal climbed the stairs first, his boots echoing on the metal, going unheard by the dozens of technicians nearby. Several passed him, paying no heed to anything beyond the digital streams on their frostbitten data-slates and the sine-wave readings on their handheld auspex readers.

Argel Tal walked across the platform, around the amniotic pods coupled to the main column – bound there by dense messes of wires, chains, cables and industrial clamps. The generators built into the column of metal made the same angry thrum as Astartes back-mounted power packs, and that little detail brought a smile to the captain's face.

The womb of the primarchs. Here, the Anathema's sons gestate in their cold cradles.

Argel Tal approached the closest pod. Its surface was unpainted grey iron, smooth in the few places where it wasn't scabbed by machinery sockets and connection ports. Etched clearly onto its front plating in silver lettering was the Gothic numeral XIII. Beneath the silver plate, an inscription was scratched into the metal in tiny, meticulous handwriting.

The exact meaning of the words escaped Argel Tal – it seemed a long and complicated prayer, beseeching outside forces for blessings and strength – but the fact he could read them was mystery enough.

'This is Colchisian,' he said aloud.

It is, and it is not.

'I can read it.'

The tongue you name Colchisian is a fragment of a primordial language. Colchisian… Cadian… these tongues were seeded onto your worlds in readiness for the coming age. The Emperor's golden pets could not read those inscriptions, for they do not carry Lorgar's blood in their veins. All of this was planned aeons ago.

'And the Cadians?'

Their world was touched, as Colchis was touched. Seeds planted in abundance, all to flower in this moment.

Argel Tal approached the pod marked XIII. A glass screen at eye level showed nothing but the milky fluid within.

And then, movement.

Go no closer.

The briefest shadow of something stirred inside the artificial womb.

Stay back. The daemon's voice was edged now – sharpened by concern.

Argel Tal stepped closer.

A child slumbered within the gestation pod, curled up in foetal helplessness, its eyes closed. It turned slowly in the amniotic milk, half-formed limbs moving in somnolent repose.

Stay back, Word Bearer. I sense your rising wrath. Do not assume I am the only one who is capable of feeling it. Strong emotion will also alert the Anathema.

Argel Tal leaned closer to the pod. His fingertips brushed frost from its surface.

'Guilliman,' he whispered.

The child slept on.

Xaphen moved away from the others, coming to the pod etched with XI. Rather than peer into its depths, he looked over his shoulder at Argel Tal.

'The eleventh primarch sleeps within this pod – still innocent, still pure. I ache to end this now,' he confessed.

Malnor chuckled from behind the Chaplain. 'It would save us all a lot of effort, wouldn't it?'

'And it would spare Aurelian from heartbreak.' Xaphen traced his fingertips over the designating numeral. 'I remember the devastation that wracked him after losing his second and eleventh brothers.'

Argel Tal still hadn't left Guilliman's pod. 'We do not know for certain if our actions here would change the future.'

'Are some chances not worth taking?' asked the Chaplain.

'Some are. This one is not.'

'But the Eleventh Legion—'

'Is expunged from Imperial record for good reason. As is the Second. I'm not saying I don't feel temptation creeping over me, brother. A single sword thrust piercing that pod, and we'd unwrite a shameful future.'

Dagotal cleared his throat. 'And deny the Ultramarines a significant boost in recruitment numbers.'

Xaphen regarded him with emotionless eyes, seeming to weigh the merit of such a thing.

'What?' Dagotal asked the others. 'You were thinking it, too. It's no secret.'

'Those are just rumours,' Torgal grunted. The assault sergeant didn't sound particularly certain.

'Perhaps, perhaps not. The Thirteenth definitely swelled to eclipse all the other Legions around the time the Second and Eleventh were "forgotten" by Imperial archives.'

Enough of this insipid conjecture, came the disembodied voice again.

Argel Tal looked below the platform, where the scientists laboured at their stations. Most were dealing with bloodwork, or working on biopsies of pale flesh. He recognised the extracted organs immediately.

'Why are these men and women experimenting on Astartes gene-seed?' he asked. The other Word Bearers followed his gaze.

They are not experimenting on it. They are inventing it.

Argel Tal watched them work, as Ingethel's voice hissed on. He saw several of the workers nearby slicing open the pale organs with silver scalpels. Each of them bore the numeral *I* on the back of their environment suits.

Your Emperor has conquered his own world with the proto-Astartes created in far inferior conditions. Now he breeds the primarchs, and in their shadow, he breeds the warriors he needs to lead the Great Crusade.

He watched them work, but the sight of his genetic genesis left his skin crawling.

These are the prototypical organs that will become the gene-seed for the first true Astartes. You know them as—

'The Dark Angels,' said Argel Tal. 'The First Legion.' Below him, the biotechnicians scalpelled through malformed organs, threaded veins, analysed with microscopes, and took tissue samples for further testing. The progenoid glands implanted in his own throat and chest throbbed with sympathetic ache. He lifted a hand to rub at the sore spot on the side of his neck, where the organ hidden beneath the skin did its silent work – storing his genetic coding until the moment of his death, whereupon it would be harvested and implanted within another child. The boy would, in turn, grow to become a Word Bearer. No longer human. No longer *Homo Sapiens*, but *Homo Astartes*.

It will be many Terran years before the organs below are ready for implantation in human youths. This is early in the process. Most of the flaws in gene-seed structure will be written out in the course of the coming decades.

The captain didn't like the creature's tone. 'Most?'

Most. Not all.

'The Thousand Sons,' said Xaphen. 'Their genetic code was misaligned. The Legion was afflicted by mutation and psychic instability.'

They are not alone in their flaws. The unwinding years will bring these biological errors to light. Gene-seed degeneration resulting in organ failure, stealing the ability to salivate venom; intolerance to certain radiation will alter a warrior's skin and bones.

'The Imperial Fists,' said Malnor. 'And the Salamanders.'

'But what of us?' Dagotal asked.

There was a pause as Ingethel whisper-laughed behind their eyes. *What of you?*

'Will we suffer from those… impurities?'

'Answer him,' said Argel Tal. 'He asks what we all wish to know.'

The code written into your bodies is purer than most. You will suffer no special degeneration, and endure no unique flaws.

'But there *is* something,' he said. 'I hear it in your voice.'

No Astartes is as loyal to their primarch as the XVII are to Lorgar. No Imperial warrior believes in their father's righteousness with as much faith and ardent devotion.

Argel Tal swallowed. It felt cold, and tasted sour. 'Our loyalty is bred into our blood?'

No. You are sentient creatures with free will. This is no more than a minor divergence in an otherwise flawless code. Your gene-seed enhances the chemicals in your brain tissue. It gives you focus. It grants you unbreakable loyalty to your cause, and to Lorgar Aurelian.

'I do not like the turn this revelation is taking,' the captain confessed.

'Nor I,' admitted Torgal.

The surprise you feel is false, Argel Tal. You have seen this before, reflected in the eyes of your brother Legions. Think of the compliance of Cassius, when the pale sons of Corax watched you with distaste, arguing against your savage purge of the heathen population. The Thousand Sons at Antiolochus… The Luna Wolves at Davin… The Ultramarines at Syon…

All of your brothers have watched you and hated you for your unquestioning, focused wrath.

He moved back to Guilliman's pod, examining it rather than paying attention to the technicians below. 'I will speak of this no further.'

It is not a flaw to believe, Word Bearer. There is nothing purer.

Argel Tal paid the daemon's words no mind. Something else had caught his attention and wouldn't let go.

'Blood of the… Look. Look at this.' The captain crouched by the lower half of Guilliman's coffin-womb. A bulky generator box was half-meshed with the main machinery behind the gestation pod. Coolant feeds quivered as they pumped fluid, and the details that could be made out through gaps in the armoured covering showed the generator's internal compartments were filled with bubbling red liquid.

Dagotal looked over Argel Tal's shoulder. 'Is that blood?'

The captain gave Dagotal a withering look.

'What?' the sergeant asked.

'It's haemolubricant, for a machine-spirit. These secondary generators are fastened behind each pod. And look, they run along the spinal columns of these structures, up the tower.'

Dagotal and the others looked around. 'So?'

'So where have you seen power generators of similar design before? What engine requires a machine-spirit of this complexity to function?'

'Oh,' the sergeant said. *'Oh.'*

The Word Bearers looked up at the central column, juddering and humming with its machine-parts and multiple power supplies.

At last… Yes…

'This is more than an incubation tower,' said Xaphen.

You are so close now…

Argel Tal looked at the pods, each in turn, and the insanely complex array of machinery coupling them to the central column.

Yes… Yes… Witness the truth…

'This is a generator,' his voice softened in disbelief, 'for a Geller Field.'

XAPHEN CIRCLED THE walkway, his clanging boot steps unheard by the horde of technicians working away. Argel Tal watched his Chaplain moving around the pods, a slow suspicion creeping over the back of his neck. Both warriors were unhelmed, and thin sheens of icy sweat glistened on their faces.

'The most powerful Geller Field in existence,' Argel Tal gestured to the machinery. 'The generators on board our vessels, linked with the Navigators… they are a shadow of what we're seeing here.'

You do not truly comprehend the effect you name a Geller Field. It is more than a kinetic shield against warp energy. The warp itself is the Sea of Souls. Your fields repel raw psychic force. They are a bulwark against the claws of the neverborn.

'The question we must ask ourselves,' Xaphen spoke as he stroked the surface of the pod marked XVII, 'is *why* these incubators are shielded against…'

Say it.

Xaphen smiled. '…against daemons.'

Torgal joined the Chaplain before Lorgar's pod. He stared inside at the slumbering infant for some time.

'I believe I know. These children are almost grown to the point of birth. Daemon? Spirit?'

I am here.

Torgal looked acutely uncomfortable interacting with a disembodied voice. 'The Legions tell the tale of the Emperor's twenty sons being cast into the heavens by some great tragedy, some flaw in their creation process.'

You have been raised with tales of the primarchs that lead your Legions, but you have been fed centuries of lies. In a matter of moments, you will witness the truth. The Anathema dealt with the Powers of the warp long before he left Earth on the Great Crusade.

The Anathema desired mighty sons, and the gods granted him the lore to forge them with a union of divine genetics and psychic sorcery. He

came to my masters, hungry for answers, beseeching the gods for power. With the lore they gave him, he shaped his twenty sons.

But treacheries have occurred. Oaths – sworn in blood and paid in soul – have been broken. The Anathema now refuses to show humanity the Primordial Truth, and the gods of the warp grow wrathful.

The Anathema is keeping its twenty primarch sons and paying no price to the Powers that gifted him with the knowledge to shape them.

Xaphen gripped the handrail to keep from going to his knees. 'Our father – *all of our fathers* – are the spawn of ancient blood rituals and forbidden science.'

Argel Tal couldn't keep from laughing. 'The Emperor that denies all forms of divinity shaped his own sons with the blessings of forgotten gods. Prayers and sorcery are written upon their gestation pods. This is the most glorious madness.'

Be ready. The reckoning comes. The Powers will reach into the material realm to reclaim the sons they helped breed.

Argel Tal looked at the pods through a smile that wouldn't fade. 'This Geller Field. It fails, doesn't it?'

It will fail in exactly thirty-seven beats of your heart, Argel Tal.

'And the primarchs are seized – taken by your masters in the warp. That's the accident that casts them across the galaxy.'

The warp gods are the primarchs' rightful fathers. This is not to spite your Emperor. It is nothing but divine justice. And as these perfect children travel through the stars, they will grow. This is the first step in the gods' plans to save mankind.

'And Aurelian…'

Is the most important one of all. Lorgar's incubation pod will be carried to Colchis, to walk the first steps to enlightening humanity of the Primordial Truth, and the gods behind the stars. Without the gods, humanity will die, piece by piece, under the predation of the aliens that still lay claim to much of the galaxy. Those that remain will die as the eldar died: in agony, unable to see the Primordial Truth before their very eyes.

This is Fate. It is written in the stars. Lorgar knows that humanity needs divinity – it is what shaped his life and Legion. It is why he was chosen as the favoured son.

Xaphen closed his eyes, murmuring a litany from the Word. 'Faith raises us above the soulless and the damned. It is the soul's fuel, and the driving force behind millennia of mankind's survival. We are hollow without it.'

Argel Tal drew his weapons. The swords of red iron slid free from their scabbards with twin hisses.

Yes. Yes…

Both blades sparked into electrical life as the captain pulled the handle-triggers. Xaphen regarded him with hooded eyes.

'Do it,' the Chaplain said. 'Let it begin.'

Argel Tal whirled the blades in slow, arcing loops, their crackling power fields growing more intense, the blades emanating ozone mist as they burned and rasped through the frozen air.

'Aurelian,' whispered Malnor. 'For Lorgar.'

'For the truth,' Torgal said. 'Do it, and we will carry these answers back to the Imperium.'

Argel Tal looked at Dagotal; the youngest of his sergeants, only recently promoted before the Legion's humiliation. The outrider commander's eyes were distant.

'I am weary of being lied to by the Emperor, brother. I am so tired of being ashamed, when what we believe is the truth.' Dagotal nodded, meeting his captain's eyes at last. 'Do it.'

Three.

He stepped forward, staring at a cluster of vein-like cables twitching as they channelled artificial blood around the semi-organic tower machine.

Two.

Argel Tal span the swords, leaving blurred trails of lightning in their wake.

One.

The blades chopped down, crashing through steel, iron, rubber, copper, bronze and vat-grown blood.

Both swords exploded in his hands, their blades shattering like smashed glass and decorating his bare face with bloody cuts.

And then, for one horrific, familiar moment, Argel Tal saw nothing but burning, psychic gold.

EIGHTEEN

A Hundred Truths
Resurrection
Return

'I heard your brother,' Argel Tal confessed.

The primarch was no longer writing. For several minutes, Lorgar had done nothing but listen in mounting emotion as the captain relayed the events in Ingethel's vision. Now, at these words, he released a breath he'd been holding for some time.

'Magnus?'

Argel Tal had never heard his sire speak so softly. 'No. The Warmaster.'

The golden-skinned giant brushed his hands over his face, seemingly afflicted by a sudden weariness. 'I do not know that title,' he said. 'Warmaster. An ugly word.'

Argel Tal chuckled in two voices. 'Of course, forgive us, Lorgar. He will not be named that for some time. He is still merely Horus. When the vision ended in golden light, we could see nothing beyond the flare. But we heard your brother Horus. The machinery was breaking down, rattling and crashing. There was gunfire. The rush of the most powerful wind we've ever felt. And we heard Horus's voice – shouting, defiant, enraged. It was as if he were there with us, seeing what we saw.'

'Stop saying "we". You are Argel Tal.'

'We are Argel Tal, yes. In forty-three years, Horus will speak four words that will save humanity or lead to its extinction. We know what those words are, Lorgar. Do you?'

Lorgar cradled his head in his hands, fine fingers pressed to the elegant runes inked onto his skin.

'This is too much. Too much to bear. I… I need Erebus here. I need my fa— Kor Phaeron.'

'They are far from here. And we will tell you something more: neither Erebus nor Kor Phaeron would struggle to accept the truths that we speak. Kor Phaeron has always kept his belief in the Old Ways hidden behind lying smiles, and Erebus drools in the presence of power. Neither of those twisted warlocks would hold their heads in their hands and panic about how the Imperium will—'

Argel Tal's voices fell silent, quenched by the golden hand around his emaciated throat.

Lorgar rose to his feet in a smooth and effortless motion, dragging the Astartes up with him, the captain's feet lifting from the deck.

'You will watch your tongue when you speak the names of my mentors, and you will speak with respect when you address the lord of your own Legion. Is that understood, beast?'

Argel Tal didn't answer. His hands clawed at the primarch's forearm in desperate futility.

Lorgar hurled the skeletal figure against the wall. The captain crashed against the metal and tumbled to the floor.

'Wipe that filthy grin from your lips,' Lorgar demanded.

When the Astartes lifted his face to regard the primarch, it was Argel Tal who looked out through his own eyes once more.

'Control yourself, captain,' Lorgar warned. 'Now finish your tale.'

'I saw things.' Argel Tal tried to rise on trembling limbs. 'When the gold faded, there was more to see. Visions. I can't explain it any other way, sire.'

Sensing his son's return to the fore, Lorgar helped Argel Tal to a seating position.

'Speak,' he said.

ONE BY ONE, the pods came down.

Alone now, Argel Tal stood on the surface of each world and watched them strike home. Not all of them; and that itself was a source of mystery. Was there some significance in the planetfalls he was entitled to witness? Why these, and not others?

The first was a blazing meteorite, ploughing into the soft soil of a temperate world. The pod didn't punch deep; it carved a furrow in the ground and skidded to a halt in the midst of an evergreen forest so dense that the overhanging trees refused the moonlight above.

The child that emerged from the broken pod was pale of skin and fierce of eye. His hair was as black as the armour of the warriors he would grow to lead.

Twilight fell without warning—

—WITHERING THE TREES to dust, their ashes scattering in the sudden wind. In place of the lush forest was bleak tundra reaching from horizon to horizon, populated by black rock and stunted, colourless flora.

The pod rained down aflame from the grey sky, crashing against the jagged slopes of a cliff side and causing an avalanche of tumbling rocks in its wake. When the dust finally cleared, Argel Tal saw a slender child rise from the wreckage of metal and stone, brushing his dusty hands through hair the white of flawless marble.

The boy looked to his surroundings, while—

—ARGEL TAL WAS alone on a mountaintop, snow clinging to his armour as it fell. On a distant peak, a fortress stood silhouetted against a clean sky, its exquisite stone battlements and towers lit by the sun shining down through a break in the clouds.

The Word Bearer stared upward, feeling the light snowfall cool his fevered skin as he watched the pod fall from the heavens. When it struck the earth, it hit with enough force to drive itself into the side of the mountain, shaking the ground with the anger of an artillery barrage.

Argel Tal waited, watching the wound in the mountainside. At last, a child emerged, climbing over the rocks with ease, his skin bronze in the high sun. For a moment, it seemed the child saw him, but—

—NO WORLD SHOULD ever be this dark.

Argel Tal's eyes took a few seconds to pierce the deep night, and what met his gaze was no better than the preceding darkness. A lightless sky was dominated by an imposing moon that eclipsed the starlight rather than reflect the sun. A sprawling city on the horizon was barely lit, as though the eyes of its denizens would rebel against any true illumination.

Fire heralded the pod's arrival – brightening the air over the wasteland with blazing light as it tore groundward. The impact was a spear-thrust into the metallic-smelling soil, driving the incubator deep into the ground with enough force to split the land with tectonic cracks.

The Word Bearer maintained his balance, breathing in air that tasted of iron and waiting for signs of movement from the chasm freshly-carved into the infertile earth.

The boy that rose under the night sky was corpse-pale, and unique among the progenitors Argel Tal had seen so far, for he carried a shard of his gestation pod clutched tight in his fist – a knife, crude and instinctive, made from the twisted metal of his pod.

Thunder announced itself overhead. The boy raised his face to the sky, a sudden trident of lightning illuminating the child's gaunt, unhealthy features.

Argel Tal—

—STOOD ATOP ANOTHER cliff edge, this one overlooking a valley that split a brutal mountain range.

The pod hammered down – a blur of grey metal – smashing against the rock walls without piercing the stone. Argel Tal watched as the pod span end over end, wrecking itself in its devastating fall down the mountainside. Dark metal ripped from its armoured hull, shed like peeling scabs.

It came to rest upside-down at the bottom of the valley, and Argel Tal's visor zoomed in to compensate for the distance. He saw the pod shake once, twice, then roll aside, pushed away by

the infant it had contained. Free of his burden, the boy touched trembling hands to a face awash with blood.

The scream of pain that rose from the valley had no place leaving the lips of a child so young.

When—

—EVERYTHING CHANGED AGAIN, Argel Tal watched the dusk through a haze of mist. The fog was thin, a sickly celadon jade that spoke of both chill air and toxicity. What little daylight pierced the mist was born of a pinprick sun, meagre in both size and generosity, setting below a flat horizon.

Plainsland stretched in every direction, as uninspiring and barren as any number of ignorable lifeless worlds Argel Tal had passed as part of the Great Crusade's expeditionary fleets.

The falling pod trailed smoke and flame, burning with green fire as it ignited the virulence in the mist. Its final descent brought it hammering against the rocky ground, cracking open as it skidded over the shale.

The Word Bearer moved closer to the downed capsule, seeing tendrils of fog creeping through the rent metal, misting up the interior behind the clear viewplate. Something pale moved within, but—

—HE WAS STANDING in the white stone and shining crystal heart of a city, surrounded by spires, pyramids, obelisks and towering statuary.

The pod fell from the summer sky at a meteor's angle, shearing through a slender tower with a crash of breaking glass that could be heard across the city. A moment later, the incubator cracked the mosaic ground, sliding and burning across the white stone until it ended its fiery journey against the base of a great pyramid.

Crowds of tanned, handsome figures gathered in the afternoon sunlight, watching as the metal coffin's rivets and bolts unscrewed and removed themselves, detached by unseen hands. Plate by plate, the pod's armour plating lifted away, floating in

the air above the crash site. At last, the final structural pieces drifted apart, while at the heart of the hovering display was a red-haired child, his eyes closed, his skin a burnished coppery red.

The boy's feet didn't touch the ground. He floated a metre above the burned mosaics, and at last opened his eyes. Argel Tal—

—WALKED THE SURFACE of a wasted world. The air held the taint of exhaust fumes, and the lifeless landscape was a grey twin to Luna, Terra's only moon.

The pod fell from a night sky filled with stars – each of the constellations pregnant with the promise of deeper meaning. The ground rumbled in protest as the pod struck, and the Word Bearer climbed the small rise of a crater's lip to see the incubator gouging a furrow through the silvery soil.

The pod's door blasted open even as it was coming to rest, clanging loudly in the silent night. The boy that rose from the confines was inhumanly handsome, his fine features pale and contemplative, his grey eyes matching the earth of the world he'd landed upon.

There was no—

—CHANCE TO MOVE closer.

He was home. Not the sterile decks of the expeditionary fleet, nor even the Spartan sanctuary of his meditation chamber aboard *De Profundis.* No, he was *home.*

The sky was a cloudless expanse of blue above the dusty desert, while a city of grey flowers and fire-hardened red bricks sat by the side of a wide river. Argel Tal regarded the Holy City from his position downriver; such was his pleasure at this curious homecoming that he forgot to look up until the last moment.

The pod – his father's black iron womb – hit the rushing river with a great splash, throwing spray and a fine wet mist into the air. Argel Tal was already sprinting, his armour joints whirring

as he ran over the arid soil. He didn't care if this was a vision or if he was really here; he had to reach his father's pod.

Astartes battle armour wasn't made for this. With its immense weight, his boots sank into the sticking river mud, generating grinding protests from the inbuilt mercury-threaded stabilisers in his shins and knee-joints.

The Word Bearer hauled himself through the waist-deep mud, clambering lower down the riverbank to reach the downed capsule. As he neared the incubator, one thing was obvious above all else: Lorgar's pod had suffered a great deal more damage than any other.

He reached out, the ceramite armouring his fingers just managing to scrape the pod's side, and an image flashed before his eyes, superimposing itself over reality.

The pod rattled, spinning through the void, tumbling alone through the warp's tides. Burn marks and cracks appeared as the lurching journey continued, while mist the colour of madness seeped in through the armour cracks. The child within slept on as pain marred its features, now restless in its repose.

See how the gods of this galaxy treasured your primarch above the others, keeping him in the Sea of Souls for decades, preparing him for the role he would play in the ascension of mankind to divinity.

Lorgar felt their blessed touch more than any of his brothers.

Argel Tal—

–STUMBLED, STAGGERING TO a halt.

The pod before him was a clone to his father's, but growing faint and indistinct before his eyes. The ground was dark, the night sky was starless, and for a moment Argel Tal wasn't sure whether he stood on the surface of a world or the deck of a powered-down ship.

As his senses faded, he caught a momentary glimpse through the viewplate on the pod's bulky front. Whatever moved within the incubator had too many limbs to be a lone human child.

Argel Tal stepped closer, only to have his attention stolen by a blur of scarlet in the glass reflection. It was his helm, his chest-

plate, but warped by ivory protrusions – a twisted, gothic bio-architecture formed from ceramite and bone. The face that looked back was a tusked rendition of his war helm, painted crimson and black but for the golden star around his right eye lens.

He—

—OPENED HIS EYES.

The observation deck, on board the *Orfeo's Lament.* The sky beyond the dome was full of thrashing chaos.

The daemon remained exactly where it had been, its muscled form never completely still, forever swaying side to side, its claws flicker-twitching in the air. Xaphen, Torgal, Malnor, Dagotal – all were exactly as they had been before.

The outrider sergeant checked his retinal chron. Three seconds had passed. Four. Five.

They'd been gone no time at all.

'Was any of that real?' he asked.

Ingethel the Ascended gestured with two of its spindly arms, the talons pointing to the ground behind the Word Bearers. There, on the decking, were the swords of red iron: broken beyond repair, the shards darkened by scorch markings from the detonation that ruined them.

'That looks real to me,' Xaphen chuckled.

You have seen much, and learned more. One matter remains. The daemon slithered around the Astartes, circling them with slow relish. Something akin to amusement glinted in its ugly eyes as it watched Argel Tal.

'What remains?'

A leap of faith.

Xaphen's eyes met Argel Tal's. 'We've come this far. We stand united.'

The captain nodded.

A choice must be made. You have witnessed the truth of the gods. You have seen the Emperor's own lies laid bare, and you know the slow ex-

tinction that awaits humanity if the species remains blind to the Primordial Truth.

So choose.

'Choose *what?*' Argel Tal narrowed his eyes. Unwilling to tolerate the creature's stench any longer, he put on his helm, breathing easier as the collar seals hissed and locked.

To lower this vessel's Geller Field. Ingethel stroked a claw down the dome's side. On the other side of the dense glass, screaming faces and frantic talons pressed against the daemon's hand. *Lower the Geller Field. Become the architects of humanity's destiny, and the weapons Lorgar needs to wield against the Empire of Lies.*

The Word Bearers didn't all react alike. Xaphen closed his eyes with a knowing smile, as if this confirmed something he'd been waiting to hear. Torgal rested his hands on his holstered pistol and sheathed blade, while Malnor placed his grey gauntlet on the stocks of the two bolt pistols mag-locked to his thighs. Dagotal stepped back from the group, his body language betraying his unease even though his eye lenses gave no emotion away.

Argel Tal didn't reach for a weapon. Instead, he laughed.

'You are insane, creature.'

This is the respect you show to a messenger of the gods?

'What did you expect? That the Word Bearers would kneel and accept everything you said as a divine mandate? We are done with kneeling, Ingethel.'

The daemon's maw quivered as it offered a rattish hiss. *Lower the Geller Field and you will taste the last promise of proof.*

'We must heed the messenger's words,' said the Chaplain.

'Enough, Xaphen.'

'Aurelian demanded this of us! We were ordered to follow the guide, no matter where he led us. How can you baulk at the final moment of truth?'

'*Enough.* We are not risking the ship in this storm. We already lost the *Shield of Scarus*. A hundred brothers lost in this sector of space, and you smile when it comes to losing a hundred more.'

They were not chosen, Argel Tal. You are. It was their time to meet destruction. They lacked the strength of will to endure what you are being offered.

The captain rounded on the daemon. 'What will happen if we lower the field? Will we be at the mercy of the storm? Pulled apart like every other Imperial vessel that lost Geller stability during warp flight?'

No. Lower the anathemic skin, and my kin will come to join us. To share the final revelation with the gods' chosen warriors.

'Daemons… on the ship.' Argel Tal watched the faces of screaming souls thrashing against the dome. 'This cannot be our choice. These cannot be the gods of the galaxy.'

Xaphen softened his voice. To Argel Tal's ears, he'd never sounded more like Erebus, his former mentor.

'Brother… We were never given a promise that the truth would be easy to bear. The way we were chosen – and our father favoured – by true divine power.'

Argel Tal turned to stare at Xaphen through a targeting reticule. 'You seem very certain about this course of action, *brother*.'

'Are you not honoured to be chosen like this? I wish to be one of the first to receive the blessing of the gods. It is a leap of faith, as Ingethel said.'

'Sylamor will not lower the Geller Field, even if we order it. It would be suicide.'

There will be no fruitless death. This is your moment of ascension, Word Bearers. Let fate take its course. Think of your primarch, kneeling in the dust before Guilliman and the God-Emperor.

This moment will be the beginning of his vindication. The Emperor's lies will damn your species. The Primordial Truth will set it free.

'We can carry this lore back to the Imperium, but humanity will never surrender itself to this… chaos.'

Humanity has no choice. It will die under the claws of aliens, and those few that survive will be swallowed by the spreading influence of the warp gods. They only grow stronger, Argel Tal. If one refuses to worship them, then that species has no place in this galaxy.

The Word Bearer didn't speak the words that lay on his tongue – nevertheless, the daemon sensed them.

What will you do, human? Fight us? Wage war against the gods themselves? How lovely, to imagine the little Empire of mortal man laying siege to heaven and hell.

Just like the eldar… You will see the Primordial Truth, or you will be destroyed by it.

'One last question,' he said.

Ask.

'You name the Emperor as the Anathema. Why?'

Because of the future. The Emperor will damn your species, denying humanity its birthright as the chosen children of the gods. He wages war against divinity, shrouding your species in ignorance. That will damn you all. The Emperor is not only loathed for his treacheries against the gods, he is anathemic to all human life.

Lorgar knows this. It is why he sent you into the Eye. Your enlightenment is the first step in the human race's ascendancy.

Argel Tal looked into the daemon's eyes for a long, long moment. In the mismatched depths, he once more saw Lorgar abase himself in the dust. He felt the deceitful Emperor's psychic gale throwing him from his feet, casting him to the dirt before the Ultramarines.

He felt the serenity of standing in the City of Grey Flowers, knowing beyond doubt that his cause was holy, that his crusade was just. How long had it been since he'd felt such purity of purpose?

'Qan Shiel Squad,' Argel Tal spoke into the vox. 'Make your way to Geller Generation on deck three. Squad Velash, move to support Qan Shiel.'

Affirmations crackled back. 'Orders, sir?' asked Sergeant Qan Shiel. 'I… we have all heard as you heard.'

The captain swallowed.

'Destroy the Geller Field generator. That's an order. All Word Bearers, stand ready.'

NINETY-ONE SECONDS later, the ship gave the slightest rumble beneath their feet.

Ninety-four seconds later, it pitched to starboard, wrenched from orbit by the storm's rage, drowning in the thrashing tides.

Ninety-seven seconds later, light died on every deck, bathing the crew and their Astartes protectors in the red gloom of emergency sirens.

Ninety-nine seconds later, every vox-channel erupted in screaming.

Ingethel uncoiled itself and launched forward, reaching for Malnor first.

XAPHEN LAY DEAD at the creature's feet.

His spine twisted, his armour broken, a death that showed no peace in rest. A metre from his outstretched fingers, his black steel crozius rested on the deck, silent in deactivation. The corpse was cauled by its helm, its final face hidden, but the Chaplain's scream still echoed across the vox-network.

The sound had been wet, strained – half-drowned by the blood filling Xaphen's ruptured lungs.

The creature turned its head with a predator's grace, stinking saliva trailing in gooey stalactites between too many teeth. No artificial light remained on the observation deck, but starlight, the winking of distant suns, bred silver glints in the creature's unmatching eyes. One was amber, swollen, lidless. The other black, an obsidian pebble sunken deep into its hollow.

Now you, it said, without moving its maw. Those jaws could never form human speech. *You are next.*

Argel Tal's first attempt to speak left his lips as a trickle of too-hot blood. It stung his chin as it ran down his face. The chemical-rich reek of the liquid, of Lorgar's gene-written blood running through the veins of each of his sons, was enough to overpower the stench rising from the creature's quivering, muscular grey flesh. For that one moment, he smelled his own death, rather than the creature's corruption.

It was a singular reprieve.

The captain raised his bolter in a grip that trembled, but not from fear. This defiance – this was the refusal he couldn't voice any other way.

Yes, the creature loomed closer. Its lower body was an abomination's splicing between serpent and worm, thick-veined and leaving a viscous, clear slug-trail that stank of unearthed graves. *Yes.*

'No,' Argel Tal finally forced the words through clenched teeth. 'Not like this.'

Like this. Like your brothers. This is how it must be.

The bolter barked with a throaty chatter, a stream of shells that hammered into the wall, impacting with concussive detonations that defiled the chamber's quiet. Each buck of the gun in his shaking hand sent the next shell wider from the mark.

Arm muscles burning, he let the weapon fall with a dull clang. The creature did not laugh, did not mock him for his failure. Instead, it reached for him with four arms, lifting him gently. Black talons scraped against the grey ceramite of his armour as it clutched him aloft.

Prepare yourself. This will not be painless.

Argel Tal hung limp in the creature's grip. For a brief second, he reached for the swords of red iron at his hips, forgetting that they were broken, the blades shattered, on the gantry decking below.

'I can hear,' his gritted teeth almost strangled the words, 'another voice.'

Yes. One of my kin. It comes for you.

'This… is not what… my primarch wanted…'

This? The creature dragged the helpless Astartes closer, and burst Argel Tal's secondary heart with a flex of thought. The captain went into violent convulsions, feeling the pulped mass behind his ribs like a bunch of crushed grapes, but the daemon cradled him with sickening gentleness.

This is exactly what Lorgar wanted. This is the truth.

Argel Tal strained for breath that wouldn't come, and forced dying muscles to reach for weapons that weren't there.

The last thing he felt before he died was something pouring into his thoughts, wet and cold, like oil spilling behind his eyes.

The last thing he heard was one of his dead brothers drawing a ragged breath over the vox-channel.

And the last thing he saw was Xaphen twitching, rising from the deck on struggling limbs.

LORGAR LOWERED THE quill once more. An unknowable emotion burned in his eyes – whatever it was, Argel Tal had never seen it before.

'And so we come full circle,' said the primarch. 'You died and resurrected. You found the crew slain. You sailed out from the Eye, taking seven months to do so.'

'You desired answers, sire. We brought them to you.'

'I could not be prouder of you, Argel Tal. You have saved humanity from ignorance and extinction. You have proved the Emperor wrong.'

The captain watched his father closely. 'How much of this did you already know, sire?'

'Why do you ask?'

'You lingered for three nights in the Cadian caves with Ingethel. How much of this tale had the creature already told you before you sent us in to the Eye?'

Lorgar released a breath, not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. 'I did not know what would happen to you, my son. Please believe me.'

Argel Tal nodded. That was good enough.

He started to answer, but the affirmation caught in his throat. Was this the genetic loyalty all Astartes felt for their primarchs, only magnified in the XVII Legion? Would he ever be able to see deceit in his father's eyes, even if the Urizen lied right to his face?

Entire worlds had fallen to Lorgar's oratory without a single shot being fired in anger. In his son's eyes, he personified the persuasive, soulful charm so resplendent in the Emperor – always seeming above anything as base and crude as deception.

And yet, Ingethel's words cast the shadow of doubt.

'I believe you, father,' he said, hoping the words were true rather than knowing they were.

'We must cover our tracks.' Lorgar shook his head slowly. 'The Cadians' lives are evidence that the Emperor must never see. With his watchdogs among us, my father will know we witnessed the Cadian rituals, and that we ventured into the Eye. We must remain pure in the Emperor's eyes. The storm revealed nothing. The Cadians… well, they were destroyed for their deviance.'

Argel Tal swallowed acid. 'You will destroy the tribes?'

'We must cover our tracks,' Lorgar sighed. 'Genocide has never given me pleasure, my son. Tales of unrest will be spread among the fleet, and we will use tectonic weapons on the landing site to destroy the tribes that occupy the wastelands.'

Argel Tal said nothing. There was nothing he could say.

'You are reborn,' Lorgar pressed his palms together. 'The gods have reshaped you, granted you this great blessing.'

That's one way of seeing this, Argel Tal thought.

'I am possessed,' he replied. The words did no justice to the sense of violation, yet any other explanation would be too crude a fit. 'We were possessed, as evidence to you that Ingethel's words of the gods were truth.'

'I need no more convincing. Everything, at last, has fallen into place. I know my role in the galaxy, after two centuries of struggling to find the right path. And we will come to see your… union… as something avataric, something that exalts you in the eyes of the gods. Not a sacrifice. You were chosen, Argel Tal. Just as I was.' And yet, he did not sound as certain as his words insisted. Doubt shadowed his tone.

Argel Tal seemed lost in thought, watching the skeletal play of his opening and closing hand.

'Ingethel warned us all: this is merely the beginning. We will change as the possession takes hold, but not until the ordained time. These gods will cry out from their haven here in the storm, and when we hear them call to us, we will begin our… "evolution".'

'What form will these changes take?' Lorgar was writing once more, recording every word in his rapid, elegant script. He never went back to amend mistakes in his handwriting, for there were never any errors to amend.

'The daemon said nothing of that,' Argel Tal confessed. 'It said only that this age was coming to an end before another century has passed. When it does, the galaxy will burn and the gods will scream. Until then, we carry a second soul, letting it ripen inside us.'

Lorgar said nothing for some time. At last, he laid the quill aside and smiled at his son – a reassuring, welcoming smile.

'You must learn to hide this from the Custodes. You must hide this from everyone outside the Legion, until you hear the gods call.'

NINETEEN

Confession
Restoration
The Gal Vorbak

THE BLESSED LADY knew who it was even before the door opened.

She sat comfortably on the edge of her bed, hands folded in her lap, clad in her layered priestess's robe of cream and grey. Her sightless eyes turned to him as he entered, following the sounds of his bare feet. She heard the swish of robes rather than the thrum of active armour, and the novelty brought a smile to her lips.

'Hello, captain,' she said.

'Confessor,' he replied.

It took considerable poise to hide her shock. His voice had changed from the months of privation, sounding dryer as it left his throat. And there was something else… Something more: a new resonance despite the current weakness.

She'd heard the rumours, of course. If the talk was true, they'd resorted to killing one another and drinking their brothers' blood.

'I thought you'd have come to me before now.'

'Forgive the delay. I have been with the primarch since my return.'

'You sound tired.'

'The weakness will fade.' Argel Tal sat on the floor by her bed, taking his customary position. He'd last sat there only three

nights before, though for the Word Bearer, almost a year had passed.

'I missed you,' he told her. 'But I am glad you were not with us.'

Cyrene wasn't sure how to begin. 'I heard… things,' she said.

Argel Tal smiled. 'They are likely all true.'

'The human crew?'

'Dead, to a man. That is why I am glad you were not on board with us.'

'And you suffered as the rumours say?'

The Word Bearer chuckled. 'That depends what the rumours say.'

His casual stoicism charmed her, as it always did. The hint of another smile tickled the corners of her lips.

'Come here. Kneel, and let me see you.'

He complied, bringing his face before her and holding her wrists in a gentle grip as he led her hands. She brushed her fingertips along his skin, tracing the contours of his diminished features.

'I have always wondered if you were handsome. It is so hard to tell with only touch to rely on.'

The thought hadn't really crossed his mind before. He was bred above such matters. He told her so now, with an amused addendum: 'Whether I was or not, I have looked better than I do now.'

Cyrene lowered her hands. 'You are very gaunt,' she noted. *And your skin is too warm.*

'Sustenance was in short supply. As I said, the rumours were true.'

When silence reached out between them, she found it awkward and unsettling. Never before had they struggled for words to share. Cyrene toyed with a lock of her hair, which her maid had painstakingly arranged only half an hour ago.

'I have come for confession,' he said, breaking the silence at last. Rather than soothe her, it sent her heart racing faster. She wasn't certain she wished to know what depredations had occurred on the *Orfeo's Lament.*

But Cyrene, above all else, was loyal to her Legion. Hers was a cherished role, and she was honoured to perform it.

'Speak, warrior.' A friendly formality came over her voice. 'Confess your sins.'

She expected him to relate how he'd butchered his brothers and supped their blood to survive. She expected tales of horror from the warp storm – a storm she'd never seen herself and had only the poorly-worded descriptions of other crew members to rely on.

The captain spoke slowly, clearly. 'I have spent decades of my life waging war in the name of a lie. I have rendered worlds compliant to a false society. I need forgiveness. My Legion needs forgiveness.'

'I don't understand.'

He began to describe the last year of his life for Cyrene, just as he had for his father. She interrupted a great deal less often, and once the retelling was complete, she focused not on the greater ramifications, but the moment that she'd heard Argel Tal's voice wavering more than any other.

'You killed Vendatha,' she said, keeping her voice soft to rob the accusation of its bite. 'You killed your friend.'

Argel Tal looked into her blind eyes. Since returning from the storm's depths, looking at living beings had a strangely pleasant edge. He'd always been able to hear the liquid rhythm of her heart, but now the sound was accompanied by the teasing sense of her blood running through her veins. All that warmth, all that taste, all that life: scarcely beneath her fragile skin. Looking at her, knowing how easy it would be to kill her, was a guilty pleasure he'd never felt before.

And it was so easy to imagine. Her heart would slow. Her eyes would glaze. Her breath would shiver as her lips trembled.

Then…

Then her soul would fall into the warp, screaming in that tumultuous abyss, to shriek into those thrashing tides until it was devoured by the neverborn.

Argel Tal looked away.

'Forgive me a moment's distraction, confessor. What did you just say?'

'I said, you killed your friend.' Cyrene touched a hand to her plain silver earring. A gift from her lover, Argel Tal suspected – Major Arric Jesmetine.

The Word Bearer didn't reply right away. 'I did not come to be forgiven for that.'

'I am not sure you can be.'

The captain rose to his feet once more. 'It was a mistake to come here so soon. I had feared this hesitance between us.'

'Feared?' Cyrene smiled up at him. 'I have never heard you use that word before, Argel Tal. I thought the Astartes knew no fear.'

'Very well. It is not fear.' Those words spoken by any other might sound petulant and defensive, but she heard no such emotion in Argel Tal's voice. 'I have seen more than most Imperial souls will ever see. Perhaps I possess a greater understanding of mortality – after all, I have seen where our souls go when we die.'

'Would you still give your life for the Imperium?'

This time, there was no hesitation in his answer. 'I would give my life for humanity. I would never offer my life to preserve the Imperium. Day by day, we have sailed farther from my grandfather's empire of lies. There will be a reckoning for the deceptions he has draped over the eyes of an entire species.'

'It's good to hear you speak this way,' she said.

'Why? You delight in hearing me speak blasphemy against the Emperor's dominion?'

'No. Far from it. But you sound so certain of everything once more. I am glad you made it back from that… place.'

Cyrene offered her hand, the way a Covenant priestess would offer her signet ring to be kissed. It was an old ritual between them; with no signet ring to kiss, Argel Tal's cracked, warm lips met the skin of her knuckles for the briefest moment.

'War will come from this,' she said. 'Won't it?'

'The primarch hopes it will not. Humanity has only one choice, and it must be made by those who have sought out the answers.'

'Such as yourself?'

He chuckled again. 'No. By my father, and the brothers he can trust. Some will be brought to his side by deception, if they are too dull-minded to come in perfect faith. But we are a populous Legion, and our conquests are many, with many more to come. Much of the Imperium's border worlds will answer to the warriors of Aurelian first, and the Emperor second.'

'You… you're planning this, already?'

'It may not come to war,' he said. 'The primarch is venturing into the Great Eye to witness his own revelations. Evidently, the lives of the Serrated Sun were spent and warped in what was merely truth's prelude.'

Cyrene could hear the discomfort in his voice. He was making no move to hide it.

'Do you believe the primarch sent you in first out of… fear?'

Argel Tal didn't answer that.

'Tell me one more thing before you leave, captain.'

'Ask.'

'Why did you believe all of this? Hell-worlds. Souls. Humanity's slow extinction, and these… monsters… that call themselves daemons. What convinced you that it was more than some alien trick?'

'Such creatures are no different from the gods of countless faiths that have risen and fallen over the millennia. Few gods were benevolent creators to any culture.'

'But what if we're being lied to?'

It would have been easy to say that the faith was its own sustenance and that humanity always reached for religion; that almost every rediscovered human culture clung to their own belief in the infinite and the divine; and that here was a realm of prophecy – where beings with the power of gods had proved beyond doubt that they'd summoned the Lord of the Seventeenth Legion, shaping fate to make these events unfold.

Whether they were benevolent creator gods from mythology or mere manifestations of mortal emotion was irrelevant. Here was the divine force in a galaxy of lost souls. On the edge of the phys-

ical universe, gods and mortals had finally met, and mankind would fall without their masters.

But Argel Tal said none of this. He was weary of such explanation.

'I remember your words after Monarchia died in the Emperor's fire. You told me it was the day you truly began to believe that gods were real, once you had seen such power unleashed. I felt the same when I saw the power at work in this storm. Can you understand that, Cyrene?'

'I understand.'

'I thought you would.'

And with those words spoken, he walked from her room.

AQUILLON FOUND HIM in the practice cages.

Both warriors were aware of each other long before either said a word. Aquillon watched in silence, respectfully waiting until Argel Tal finished his round of exercises, while the Word Bearer graced the Custodian with a perfunctory nod, saying nothing as he worked through his sword work routines. Finding balance in his weakened physique was a torturous affair. The deactivated sparring blades cut the air in dull sweeps – a poor shadow of the lost swords of red iron – and he was breathless with exertion as his hearts thudded to keep up with the demands he placed upon his emaciated physique.

At last, Argel Tal lowered the blades. His muscles ached from only two hours of training. Before his journey into the Eye, such a poor performance would see him doing penance for a ritual ninety-nine nights.

'Aquillon,' he greeted his friend.

'You look as though you died and forgot to lie down.'

The Word Bearer snorted. 'I feel like it.'

'A shame. You'd managed to last almost four minutes against me last time we stepped into these cages together.'

'I see you are not in a merciful mood.' In better times, this banter would have come easily to Argel Tal. 'Did you come to speak of Ven?'

Aquillon opened the force cage and took up a practice blade twin to the one Argel Tal still held. The sparring cage's hemispheres closed around them both. Both warriors wore robes: one, the white of Terra's palace servants, one, the grey of the XVII Legion.

'I wanted to hear it from you.' He raised the blade in a two-handed grip, mimicking his favoured weapon. His warriors carried the traditional glaives, but Aquillon's antique *bidenhander* broadsword was a blade apart. He carried this blade as he wielded his own sword: with a confident, effortless grip.

Argel Tal raised his own swords in a defensive cross, feeling the burn of lactic acid in his muscles. The two warriors tended to play to their strengths in the past: Aquillon was ferociously offensive in his blade work; Argel Tal remained consummately defensive.

'So will you tell me what happened?'

Aquillon was indeed not in a merciful mood. Before the Word Bearer could even answer, Argel Tal's blades were knocked from his hands and the captain found himself on the floor, breathing against the Custodian's sword point. It scratched the dirty skin of his throat, and Aquillon shook his head.

'Pathetic.' He offered his hand to help Argel Tal rise. 'Try again.'

The Word Bearer rose without the offered hand, retrieving his blades. 'I do not like the pity in your voice.'

'Then do something to get rid of it. But at least answer my question.'

The next clash lasted several seconds, but ended the same way. The Word Bearer backhanded Aquillon's sword away from his neck.

'Have you read the reports?' he asked the Custodian, again refusing his friend's offered hand and rising unaided.

'Yes. They are vague, and I am being generous when I say even that.'

Argel Tal had read them as well. The surface of Cadia… The journey into the Eye… The reports of each event were loose and

evasive fictions that almost moved him to laughter. 'They are vague,' he conceded, raising his blades again. 'But they are accurate. I will enlighten you where I can.'

This time, Argel Tal attacked. Aquillon disarmed him in two swings of his blade, and a boot to the solar plexus sent the Word Bearer back down to the floor.

'Begin with Vendatha. He told me that Lorgar was attending a heathen ritual and several of the officers would be with him.'

'That's true enough.'

'You are still blocking the feinted thrust, by the way.'

'I know.'

'Good. Now speak.'

Something burned in his blood. Something reactive, unwilling to be dominated. Argel Tal bit back a sudden need to curse at the Custodian in a language that was and was not Colchisian.

'It… was not a ritual in the sense that we feared it would be.' He rose to his feet as he continued. 'A tedious recital of ancient texts. Prayers to spirits of ancestors. Dances, drums and herbal narcotics.'

Blades in hands, Argel Tal attacked again. Another *clash*, *clash*, *clash,* and he was dumped back onto the floor – the back of his head perilously close to the buzzing bars of the force cage.

'Lorgar sent you into the storm based on this? A… theatrical performance of old lies?' This time, Aquillon didn't offer to help Argel Tal stand. A doubting scowl passed over his features.

'Don't be foolish.' The Word Bearer rolled his shoulders, wincing at the crackle of abused muscle and vertebrae. 'He never sent us into the storm. I volunteered. We lacked standard Mechanicum explorator vessels, so we used the smallest warship in the fleet.'

The two warriors circled one another, blades half a metre apart. 'You volunteered?'

'It was a last attempt to salvage some worth from the journey. One last venture beyond Imperial borders, before we turn around and make for new space. Aquillon… there is *nothing* out here. Do you think we wish to heap further shame upon our-

selves by admitting that? Plenty of expeditionary fleets take months, even years, to find a world worthy of conquest – but this is our primarch's fleet, even if only temporarily. Desperation drove us to try one last time. Don't hate us for doing our sworn duty.'

The Custodian attacked, his blade lashing one of Argel Tal's blades out of the captain's grip, while a kick smashed the other aside.

The Word Bearer smiled through a face streaked with sweat, and went to recover his blades yet again.

'And Vendatha?' Aquillon asked.

Argel Tal's smile faded, wiped from his face. 'Ven died with my brothers. Deumos fell first, then Rikus and Tsar Quorel. Ven was last.' The Word Bearer met the Custodian's eyes, letting his sincerity show. 'He was my friend, Aquillon. I mourn him as you do.'

'And this… riot… on the planet that killed three Astartes and a Custodes?'

'When the primarch renounced the barbarians and refused to draw them into the Imperium, they rose up in anger. What could we do? Their rituals are too far from the Imperial Truth. Never will they accept the Emperor's rule.'

'Invasion?'

'The planet is sparsely populated, and much of it is a paradise despite its proximity to the hellish storm. Cyclonic torpedoes will annihilate the tribes, and leave the planet free for future colonisation – if the Emperor wills it.'

Aquillon released a pent-up breath. There was something unarguably youthful about the warrior, despite his ageless, regenerative immortality. 'I commend Lorgar's actions in rejecting the primitives on the world below. I have seen compliance after compliance executed to perfection for three years, and I do not judge his actions as flawed now. It's difficult to believe Ven is dead, that's all. He'd earned twenty-seven names in the Emperor's service over a century of immaculate duty. The same mentor

taught us both to wield a blade. Amon will grieve to learn of his fate.'

'He died in the Emperor's service, defending a primarch from the rebellion of heathen culture. You may not respect my sire, but he is still a son of the Emperor. If I could choose my hour of death, it would be in battle at Lorgar's side.'

Aquillon raised his sword *en garde*, speaking with a curious formality. 'Thank you for your candour, Argel Tal. Our presence is loathed by your Legion, but the Custodes have always appreciated your friendship.'

The Word Bearer didn't answer. His next attack was deflected and beaten back within a matter of moments.

Aquillon offered a hand again, and this time, Argel Tal took it as he rose.

'What now for the Serrated Sun?' asked the Custodian.

'There's nothing left for us out here. Once Cadia is purged, we press on as part of the 1,301st, returning to more promising territory. I believe the primarch will rejoin the main crusade fleet, with Erebus and Kor Phaeron. He will be done with these provincial conquests. I suspect he also wishes to speak with several of his brothers.'

Aquillon nodded, and returned his practice sword to the weapon rack. His white robe was unmarked, while Argel Tal's was bathed in sweat stains down the spine and around the collar.

The Custodian saluted, making the sign of the aquila over his chest. Argel Tal returned it, as he always did in his friend's presence.

'One last thing,' the Custodian remarked.

The Word Bearer raised an eyebrow. 'Speak.'

'Congratulations, Chapter Master.'

Argel Tal couldn't resist a smile. 'I wasn't aware it was public knowledge. Will you be at the ceremony?'

'Without a doubt.' In a moment of rare fellowship, Aquillon rested his hand on Argel Tal's shoulder. 'I wish you well on your return to health. I am glad that, at the end, Vendatha stood with a friend.'

An image of Ven's last moments flashed through Argel Tal's mind: the naked Custodian twitching, gagging, being dragged down and impaled upon the wooden spear.

Unable to speak another lie, the Word Bearer merely nodded.

THE CEREMONY WAS attended by every officer of significant rank, as well as the remaining Word Bearers of the Serrated Sun, including the robed ranks of their Acolyte Auxiliary – many of whom would be elevated into the three shattered companies with the Legion's losses in recent months.

Such a gathering required use of *De Profundis*'s primary hangar deck, which in turn offered a stunning, disquieting backdrop through the open bay doors' shimmering force field. Through the haze of thin energies, the storm beyond was a swirling mess of psychic vitriol. The ship creaked and whined around them as they stood in orderly rows, facing Lorgar.

At the primarch's side, the Blessed Lady carried a rolled scroll on a plain, white cushion. She stared blindly over the ranks of Word Bearers, occasionally glancing to the towering primarch as if she could somehow see him. On Lorgar's left, Fleetmaster Baloc Torvus stood tall and proud in his ceremonial grey and white uniform, a fur cloak – once the skin of some immense arctic beast that the officer had never even seen, let alone killed himself – draped over one side of his body. None present could actually recall the last time Torvus had set foot on a planet; the man clearly treasured his place among the stars.

Fully a third of the Legion warriors were wasted husks in their half-repaired armour. These were the survivors of the Eye, standing in rows ahead of their hundred remaining brethren.

The Mechanicum contingent had manifested in full strength as well, though only one of their robotic charges was present. To no one's surprise, *Incarnadine* was among the Word Bearers ranks, the scarlet war machine bedecked in honour scrolls and towering above its living kinsmen. Despite bearing the scarlet armour of Carthage, it was a welcome presence among the Legion's grey.

Standing aside from all the others, four golden figures watched from a gantry above. Aquillon and his Custodians were resplendent in their armoured finery – the gold surfaces playing host to flickering reflections from the storm outside.

The primarch, clad in a shirt of fine silver mail, raised his hands for silence. All whispers died down immediately.

'I have brought this expeditionary fleet far from the heart of my father's kingdom. Every fleet with a Word Bearer presence has done the same, sailing far from beloved Terra, into the cold, away from the cradle of our species. We are far from our brothers and will hear tell of their travels and conquests in time, but I say this with confidence: none of my Legion has endured what you have. None have stared into the madness at the edge of the universe, as you have done. And you survived. You returned.'

Lorgar inclined his head at his warriors before continuing. 'This Legion, more than any other, has suffered through change and evolution since its inception. But each phase exalts us, improves us and brings us closer to fulfilling our potential. The Emperor bred this Legion from his biological barracks on distant Terra, and for many years only Terrans filled its ranks. A more innocent age, an age when the Legion bore a different name, and today we begin to leave the last vestiges of those days behind. The Imperial Heralds became the Word Bearers, and the Word Bearers were shown the error of their ways in worshipping the Emperor. Change upon change, all leading towards this moment.'

The primarch gestured a gloved hand to a bulkhead in the closest wall, and spoke a single word. 'Enter.'

The bulkhead opened to reveal two figures – both armoured in crimson ceramite – walking towards the primarch. The first bore a black helm with eye lenses of crystal blue. One eye was ringed by the golden Serrated Sun, and his power armour was edged in polished silver. The second carried a familiar crozius of black iron, with its armour trimmings formed of bronze and bone. Thick, ornamental chains rattled around their waists and wrists as both warriors moved. Prayer scrolls were bound to shin-

guards and pauldrons, the parchment showing the primarch's own flowing script.

'Warriors of the Serrated Sun,' Lorgar smiled. 'Kneel before your new commanders.'

Every Word Bearer went to their knees. *Incarnadine* took several seconds longer to complete its obeisance, lowering itself on grinding hydraulics.

The first crimson warrior removed his helm. Argel Tal looked upon the gathered Legion, and called out across the deck.

'Survivors of the *Orfeo's Lament*, rise and step forward.'

They did as they were ordered. Behind Argel Tal, Xaphen removed his own skulled helm, remaining by the primarch's side.

The new Chapter Master was still gaunt, as were the warriors he surveyed with a calm gaze. 'Our sire has ordered we rebuild the Serrated Sun far beyond its former strength. We obey his word, as we have always obeyed. But he has offered more. You, the survivors of the *Orfeo's Lament*, are to be honoured for your sacrifices.'

Argel Tal nodded to Xaphen, who took the scroll from Cyrene's cushion and brought it to the Chapter Master.

'This scroll is bare, but for two names. My own, and Chaplain Xaphen's. If you accept the honour of joining us as the primarch's chosen elite, then you will kneel before the Blessed Lady in this very hangar, and you will speak your name to her. It will be written upon this parchment, and stored in the vaults aboard *De Profundis*.'

Argel Tal looked each of the survivors in the eyes, one after the other. 'We will be the Gal Vorbak, armoured in black and crimson, the elite of the Serrated Sun and the chosen of Lorgar Aurelian.'

Lorgar chuckled, light and pleasant, as he stepped forward to rest a hand on Argel Tal's shoulder-guard.

ON THE GANTRY above, Kalhin let his glance flicker to Aquillon. His voice was low, despite the fact he wore his helm and none would overhear them speaking over the inter-squad vox.

'*Gal Vorbak*. I did not study their culture as you did. Is that Colchisian?'

Aquillon nodded. 'It means "Blessed Sons".'

'I am pleased for Argel Tal. He is healing well, and it will be good to turn back into fairer territory after this failed madness. Deumos was always cancerous, so I will shed no tears at his tenure coming to an end.'

That statement met with grunts of agreement from the others.

'When Lorgar returns to the 47th Expedition, should we accompany him?'

Aquillon had been dwelling on that very thought. 'Our mandate is to stand vigil over the Legion itself. Four Custodian teams, bound to four fleets. Iacus already claims the 47th, and I trust him as I trust any one of you. Let him play watchdog over this weakling primarch for a while. Our duties will keep us with the 1,301st, and the compliances to come.'

Kalhin released a slow breath. 'I would pay dearly to set eyes on Terra's skylines once more.'

'You will,' said Aquillon.

'In forty-seven years,' the other Custodian scoffed. 'Remember the terms of our oath. Five decades among the stars. Fifty long, tedious years away from Terra.'

'It beats the endless blood games,' Nirallus shrugged.

'You only say that,' Kalhin pointed out, 'because you are so awful at them.'

Aquillon heard the tension in his brothers' voices. 'The Word Bearers will not languish under suspicion forever. In three years, have you seen evidence that they still worship the Emperor? And look at them now: already their rites are growing closer to the traditions of the other Legions. This is almost like Sigismund knighting one of his templars at a gathering of the Imperial Fists.'

Kalhin shrugged. 'Perhaps they have come a long way from the fanatics we joined, but the stink of desperation yet clings to their breath when they shout their battle cries. I still do not trust them.'

The Occuli Imperator didn't take his eyes from the red-clad figure speaking with his new warriors as they knelt before the blind girl from the dead world.

'No,' he said. 'Neither do I.'

'Not even Argel Tal?'

'One warrior in an entire Legion.' Aquillon left the railing, turning back to his Custodians. 'He is the *only* one I trust. That's the problem.'

V

Smoke and Mirrors

It was a lie, of course.

Blessed Lorgar didn't return to Imperial space right away. One of the fleet's scout vessels was chosen to carry the primarch back to his main crusade fleet, and a grand event was held on every deck of De Profundis to honour the Urizen before he left.

And that was the lie.

I was there when the primarch bade farewell to his sons Xaphen and Argel Tal, and I travelled back to safer space with the new lords of the Gal Vorbak.

Lorgar, meanwhile, travelled the same path that the daemon Ingethel had chosen for his children.

With the Custodians blinded to his true destination, Lorgar went into the Eye.

His last words to Argel Tal will never leave me – not only for the events they set in motion, but for what they did to my friend, and how they changed him.

'Take the truth to Erebus and Kor Phaeron. While I am gone, they will be the Legion's lords, and they will orchestrate the spread of true faith in the shadows of my father's empire. I shall return to them soon.'

Xaphen swore an oath never to fail his primarch.

Argel Tal did not. He spoke in a voice soft enough to break hearts, 'We are heretics, father.'

Lorgar laughed his melodic laugh. 'No, we are saviours. Is all in readiness?'

'It is.'

'Sail far and wide without me, but keep the Custodians away from Imperial listeners. Once you return to stable space, they will resume

their astropathic contact with Terra. My father will suspect the truth if he knows we came this close to the galaxy's edge, and suspicion alone will be enough to damn us. I cannot remain here to block their pet astropath's reaching voice. Find a solution. Xaphen, look to the texts retrieved from Cadia. The rituals within them will provide the answer.'

'By your word, sire.'

'Keep his watchdogs alive, Argel Tal. There may yet be a means to win this war without bloodshed. But keep them silent.'

With his last words ordering the first of a thousand treacheries, the primarch boarded his vessel and left us.

What he saw within the Eye is the source of near-infinite speculation. Many of the Word Bearers came to me for weeks afterwards, wracked by dreams that barely faded when their sufferers awoke. The blood connection between Aurelian and his sons was a powerful one indeed, for what Lorgar saw with his own eyes, his sons witnessed in horrifying echoes.

It was Xaphen who spoke most of his dreams, while Argel Tal remained next to silent. The Chaplain would speak with a fevered cast in his voice, as if harsh whispers could pierce the walls of my humble chamber and reach the primarch halfway across the galaxy.

He spoke of Lorgar walking the surface of worlds where the oceans were formed from boiling blood, and the skies stood dark under heavenly cities of clanking black steel. He told me of an entire Legion in the crimson of the Gal Vorbak, waging war before the gates of a golden palace.

Most tellingly of all, he described world after world dying under the tainted touch of alien claws. He swore that this was the Imperium's demise – a godless empire reaved clean by inhuman tides. Only faith would save mankind from fate's promises. Only worship of the Great Powers nestling within the warp.

Perhaps these were the lessons Lorgar was seeing for himself, while his sons returned to spread the word among the other fleets.

Cadia burned, just as we'd all known it would. The tribes were destroyed by Argel Tal's own command, and the world left in silence, ready to be seeded with colonists in the future. He never once asked me to forgive him for it, just as he never asked me to console him over the murder of Vendatha.

I love him above all others, not only for saving my life, but for the fact he stains his soul with such blackness, yet masks his guilt and shame so completely. He has never broken, despite carrying the secrets and sins that will damn or save our entire species.

I believe the only mistake he ever made was in allowing himself to grow closer to the Custodes leader, Aquillon.

But then, it was just like Argel Tal to endure such penance. He became a brother to the one man he knew he must eventually betray.

—Excerpted from *'The Pilgrimage'*, by Cyrene Valantion

PART THREE

CRIMSON

Forty years later

TWENTY

Three Talents
A New Crusade
The Crimson Lord

ISHAQ KADEEN WAS immensely proud of himself, for he did three things in life with a skill few others could match. These three talents had earned him enough coins to rub together, no doubt there, but they'd also elevated him from the depths of poverty that had swallowed his parents – and getting out of those slums was something far out of reach for most of the beggars and street-folk in his home city.

Three talents. That's all it took.

And they weren't even that hard. If he'd needed to practise them, then it might have been a different story. Ishaq Kadeen was one of those naturally lucky souls that live their lives in the moment. He never spared a thought for getting old, never saved money with any great care, and never worried overmuch what the enforcer patrol around the next street corner might have to say about his activities.

Three talents got him through life, pitching him in and out of trouble.

The first was to run, which was a skill he'd honed by putting it to good use in the criminal-infested lower sprawls of Sudasia's primary hive city.

The second was to smile with a vicious blending of charm, smarm and intimacy, which had variously gotten him into several lines of employment, out of an entirely legal execution that he'd absolutely deserved, and even once into the fine, black lace

underwear of a countess's younger cousin – the night of the gala held to celebrate her coming of age.

The third talent, which was what had gotten him posted to his current situation in the first place, was the fact he could take a wicked pict when he wanted to.

Not a day passed that Ishaq didn't think back to the conversation that damned him out here onto the fringes of space. He'd been sitting in an austere office, absently picking dirt from beneath his nails while a robed hierarch in the Remembrancer Order droned on and on about 'noble goals' and the 'very real need' to record the present for future generations to study in excruciating detail.

'It is the greatest honour,' the stern gentleman insisted.

'Oh, I know.' Ishaq started to bite his nails now they were clean. 'The greatest.'

The older man seemed dubious. Ishaq thought he looked like a vulture disapproving of a potential meal, largely because it was still alive.

'Thousands of archivists, sculptors, painters, pictographers, poets, playwrights have been sent. Tens of thousands have been rejected for lacking the thoroughness and flair that the Great Crusade deserves in its remembrancers.'

Ishaq made a noncommittal noise to encourage the hierarch to continue, while secretly musing over the number of artistic professions beginning with the letter "P". *Painters, pictographers, poets, playwrights…*

'So you see, to be chosen like this… You have to understand how fortunate you are.'

'What about puppeteers?' Ishaq asked.

'I… what?'

'Nothing. Never mind.'

'Yes, well. I'm sure you can appreciate the gravity of the situation.' The hierarch did his vulture-sneer again. Ishaq smiled back – his eyes brightened; a faint movement of his eyebrows suggested something delightfully wry; and a calculatedly cocksure amount of teeth were on display for a predatory moment – but

the hierarch was neither female nor attracted to males, and that disinterest rather disarmed Ishaq's best weapon.

'Mr. Kadeen?' the man said. 'Are you taking this seriously? Do you wish to be shipped to Mars to end your years as a servitor?'

He really didn't. If it came to a choice between paying for his crimes in the traditional manner or catching a transport ship halfway across the galaxy to serve as a remembrancer… Well, it wasn't much of a choice at all. He wasn't going to spend his life lobotomised into penal service.

So he assured the remembrancer hierarch that he was taking it very seriously indeed. Over the following two hours, he weaved a compelling fiction of interstellar ambition and an exploratory spirit that had suffered in the strangling confines of his birth-slums. Now, at last, he would be free to walk the stars, to gaze upon new suns, to chronicle the advance of mankind, to…

To lie through his teeth.

Ishaq, at thirty-five, was not an educated man, and he was fairly certain at several points he invented new words or mispronounced ones he'd only read before, but it did the trick. Three days later, his intermittent work as an imagist for almost-wealthy hive families and crime scene pictography was behind him – as was Terra itself and the shit-heap hive in which he'd been born.

Was it an honour, really? That all depended upon just where you were sent.

In the briefings, Ishaq had been hoping against hope for a posting that would actually mean something. While the major expeditionary fleets were already swollen with remembrancer hangers-on, there were still plenty of possible placements in the smaller fleets.

He might never get to lay eyes upon the Warmaster, or see his images depict the glory of a primarch like Fulgrim, but he'd not lost hold of the desperate, panicked hope that he'd be assigned to one of the Emperor's so-called 'glory Legions'. The Ultramarines, founders of the perfect empire… The Dark Angels, commanded by the consummate general… The Word Bearers, renowned for bringing the Emperor's own wrath against enemy worlds…

At last, he'd been assigned. A full sprint through the order's barracks had ensued, with remembrancers shoving past one another to reach the posted listings in the lobby. All dignity was cast aside in the rush – artists, poets, playwrights rioting against each other to see where in the galaxy they were being sent. Someone had even been stabbed during the crush of bodies – perhaps out of jealousy, since that imagist in particular had been assigned to a fleet commanded by the Emperor's Children, and such a posting even among a modest fleet was worth its weight in gold.

There it was:

KADEEN, ISHAQ – IMAGIST

1,301st EXPEDITIONARY FLEET

WHAT DID THAT even mean? Were there even Legion forces with that fleet? He'd shouldered a young woman aside to use one of the barracks' information terminals, and hammered in his keycode with trembling fingers.

Yes. *Yes.* Each line sent his heart beating faster.

1,301st Expeditionary Fleet.

Commanded by Fleetmaster Baloc Torvus.

3 Companies of XVII Legiones Astartes: Word Bearers.

Commanded by the Crimson Lord, Master of the Gal Vorbak.

Noted Citations: Honoured by the presence of the Emperor's Custodian Guards, led by Aquillon Althas Nero Khai Marithamus… the name went on and on and on, but it didn't matter.

He'd been posted to one of the most aggressive, renowned, largest Legions, responsible for more compliances in the last half a century than any other – and a fleet, minor or not, that was honoured to contain some of the Emperor's own golden Custodes warriors. The images that could come from this… The fame… The attention…

Yes. *Yes. YES.*

'Who were you posted to?' he asked the girl next to him.

'The 277th.'

'Blood Angels?'

'Raven Guard.'

He gave her a pitying smile and headed back to his room, making sure to tell everyone on the way back where he'd been assigned. This only backfired once, when a pretentious arse of a sculptor had sneeringly replied: 'The Word Bearers? Yes, well, they've conquered much in recent years to make amends for their former flaws… but they're not exactly the Sons of Horus, are they?'

The flight to join the 1,301st Expeditionary Fleet had lasted nineteen long, long months, during which Ishaq had slept with twenty-eight separate members of the transport ship's crew, been slapped by three of them, taken almost 11,000 picts of tedious goings-on aboard the vessel, and passed out from ship-made alcohol more times than he could reliably remember.

He'd also lost a tooth in a fistfight with an angry husband, though he still claimed the moral victory in that one. Given all of this and the lifestyle that preceded it, it would be fair – but not entirely accurate – to assume that Ishaq Kadeen cared nothing for his work.

He didn't consider himself lazy. It was just difficult to find things that inspired him, that was all.

The first pict he'd truly cared about had since done the rounds of the entire 1,301st fleet, and it was, in his own inestimable opinion, an absolute beauty. Already, it was being hailed as a masterpiece in the fleet's archives, and he'd received a courier-brought note from the Crimson Lord himself, thanking him for the image.

When they'd arrived, dropping from a year and a half in the swirling tedium of the warp to approach the battlefleet, Ishaq had been unable to resist getting caught up in the moment.

With his picter rod in hand, about the size and heft of a cudgel, he'd aimed the eye lens at the view from the porthole, watching and recording the great warships drifting by.

And then, there it was. The grey-hulled fortress-flagship of Lord Argel Tal, silent and serene despite its world-breaking weapons array.

De Profundis. Ishaq's new home.

Awe left his mouth slack as he clicked pict after pict. One of them – one of the very first he took – showed the warship abeam, slaved to a sharp perspective: a stone and steel bastion of Imperial might. Starlight cast raw glares across its dense armour plating, while a statue of the primarch jutted from the vessel's spine – Lorgar, arms raised to the void, haloed by the system's distant sun.

Click, went the picter, and Ishaq Kadeen fell in love with his work.

That had been three weeks ago. Three weeks spent waiting for inspiration to strike again. Three weeks spent waiting for today.

The starboard hangar deck was a messy maze of landed gunships, load-bearing vehicles and cargo containers, populated by an army of servitors, tech-adepts and human crew going about their business. Thunderhawks were being loaded, their swooping wings weighted down by racks of missiles, while boxes of bolter shell belt-feeds were installed by the defensive turrets. All around was the rattle, the clang, the clank of heavy machinery, which was doing nothing positive for Ishaq's hangover.

At the heart of the organised chaos was the eye of the storm, where space had been cleared for the scheduled arrival. Ishaq stood at the edge of the cleared zone – just one of many witnesses to the morning's events. A glance to the left revealed a flock of other remembrancers: there was Marsin, a painter, scribbling in his sketchpad. Lueianna, a skinny and pale little thing who composed entire concerts around various flute arrangements. Hellic, who almost definitely owed Ishaq some money from the last time they played cards.

What did Hellic do? Was he a composer, as well? Ishaq wasn't sure. Whatever his fellow remembrancer did to express himself, he was a piss-poor gambler.

The Blessed Lady was here, of course – standing out from her maids and companions in a gown of arterial red that looked more suited to a Terran ballroom than the greasy, oil-blackened deck of a warship. She looked no older than her late-twenties,

though given how long she'd been with the fleet, rejuvenation surgery must have featured heavily in her recent past.

Ishaq lost a fair few minutes just watching her. She was dusky-skinned, not as dark as Ishaq himself, but clearly from a desert people, and it was easy to see why she was considered blessed. He'd never seen anyone move with the same slow, effortless grace, or smile with such subtle brilliance. Every time she shared a word with one of her entourage, she seemed to be smiling with endearing shyness at some secret joke between them.

Ishaq decided, then and there, that he wanted her.

For a moment, he was certain she turned to regard him. Wasn't she said to be blind? Was that a facade? A rumour to enhance her mystique?

An honour guard from the Imperial Army had deigned to show its face, too. White-clad officers of the Euchar 54th stood in neat ranks, their formalwear impressive in its ornate finery. Each of the officers rested a gloved hand on a sabre sheathed at their sides, while their free hands remained nestled in the small of their backs as they stood at attention. In the middle of the front row, Ishaq made out the grizzled, half-bionic figure of General Arric Jesmetine.

The general had a fearsome reputation on the ship: all the talk passed around the remembrancers had Old Arric pinned as a tyrant and a taskmaster. They'd only crossed paths once before, in an upper deck corridor while the new remembrancer was scouting around for something to inspire him.

Jesmetine had been with the fleet for sixty years, and every month of it showed. He walked with a silver cane, and most of the right side of his body hummed and whirred with the bionics beneath the old man's uniform. His beard was kept trimmed close to his haggard face, a fine pelt of white around a scowl like a slit in old leather.

'You there,' the general had said. 'Are you lost?'

Well, no, he wasn't lost. But nor was he supposed to be up here on the operations decks.

'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'You're a bad liar, son.'

This offended Ishaq a great deal, but he didn't let it show. 'Apparently so.'

'You grin too much. If I had daughters, I'd kill you for ever going near them.'

'With respect, sir, I'm not in the mood for a character assassination. And I am at least a little lost.'

'See? Grinning again, you won't charm me with that. Who are you?'

'Ishaq Kadeen, official remembrancer.' He liked the way that felt on the tongue, so he said it as often he could.

'Oh.' The old man cleared his throat with a sound like gargling gravel. 'You're not a poet by any chance, are you?'

'No, sir. I'm an imagist.'

'That's a shame. The Blessed Lady has an ear for poetry. Though, hmm, it's for the best if you never darken her door, I'm sure.'

This was before he knew who the Blessed Lady was, but that grumble alone was enough to make him vow to darken her door as soon as possible, whoever she might be.

'So you're hunting for picts to take?'

'Guilty,' Ishaq halted the grin before it reached his lips, 'as charged.'

The old man scratched at his neat beard, fingers making *scritch, scritch, scritch* sounds against what was barely more than stubble. 'This is a warship, you know. You can get in a lot of trouble wandering around like this. Go back to the lower decks, and wait for the Chaplain's arrival like everyone else. You'll get all your picts then.'

Ishaq considered that a fair deal, but as he turned to leave, he decided to push his luck a little more.

'Sir?'

'What?' The old man was already walking away, cane tapping on the decking.

'You don't seem the merciless terror that the remembrancers have been told to fear.'

General Arric smiled, which made the slit in his face even less appealing. 'That's only because you're not one of my men, Remembrancer Kadeen. Now get off the operations decks and back to the jury-rigged bar I know you little vermin are already setting up in the shadows of this blessed ship.'

'It's called the Cellar.'

'How very apt,' the old man huffed as he walked away.

So he'd waited eleven days, and true to both form and the general's appraisal, he'd spent those eleven days in the bar.

Now he was here, after hauling his hungover carcass across to the main starboard hangar, waiting with the dregs and top brass alike for the Chaplain to arrive.

'I thought the Crimson Lord was supposed to be here,' he whispered to Marsin. The other remembrancer just shrugged, still taking notes and sketching vague figures.

The Astartes were here at least, though Ishaq took much less pleasure in their presence than he'd expected. Twenty of them in all: grey statues in two ranks of ten, not a ghost of movement between any of them. Immense bolt pistols were clutched to the Word Bearers' chests, while unpowered chainswords were kept at their sides. Scrolls and iconography marked them as warriors from the 37th Assault Company.

Ishaq kept abreast of deployment chatter: most of 37th Company were engaged on the world below, waging a compliance war alongside General Arric's Euchar regiments.

He snapped several images of the towering, silent Astartes, but his angle was far from perfect, and the edge of frame was ruined by servitors stumbling around in the background. He supposed there should be something glorious and inspiring about the warriors, but he found it hard to swallow if he looked too long in their direction. They weren't inspiring at all. Just… imposing. Distant. Cold.

'Attention!' the general barked.

Ishaq conceded to this by standing slightly straighter. The Euchar officers went ramrod-straight. The Astartes still didn't move.

The gunship came into the hangar on a sedate drift, guidance thrusters gushing pressurised air as it hovered down. Crimson armour plating coated the Thunderhawk in dry scales, while heavy bolter turrets panned left and right – the servitors slaved to the guns' systems ever-alert to threats.

Landing claws kissed the decking. At last, the boarding ramp lowered on squealing hydraulics. Ishaq clicked a pict of the gunship's yawning maw.

From the hangar's edge, more Astartes entered – five warriors clad in armour of a newer, more streamlined design than their grey brethren, painted in scarlet and silver, with black helms staring ahead. The remembrancers turned as one, whispering and muttering, variously taking picts, making notes and sketching what they saw.

Gal Vorbak, came the whisper from many mouths.

Leading them was a warrior with a black cloak draped over his shoulders, and his Legion symbol hidden beneath yellowed parchment scrolls depicting his deeds. He stalked past the gathered remembrancers, the joints of his Mark IV battle armour humming a smooth hymn. Skulls of slain alien warlords rattled against his dark ceramite as they dangled from iron chains.

There he is, the whispers started up again. *The Crimson Lord.*

The warrior moved to the Blessed Lady's side, whereupon he offered her a slight inclination of his head, and spoke the name 'Cyrene' with a growl of acknowledgement.

'Hello, Argel Tal,' she smiled without looking up at him. Her entourage of maids and advisors scattered back with dignified slowness as the Gal Vorbak took their places around their master.

Ishaq took another pict: the huge warrior in his snarling black helm, and the petite figure at his side, both surrounded by red-clad Astartes.

The figure that descended from the Thunderhawk onto the hangar deck wore armour to match his brothers in the Gal Vorbak, though his trimmings were reinforced bone and bronze, and his helm bore Colchisian runes painted in gold leaf.

Chaplain Xaphen walked down the gang ramp, briefly embracing Argel Tal at the bottom.

'Cyrene,' the Chaplain said afterwards.

'Hello, Xaphen.'

'You look younger.'

She blushed, and said nothing.

Argel Tal gestured to the Thunderhawk. 'How were our brothers in the IV Legion?'

Xaphen's rumbling voice was as vox-ruined as Argel Tal's. 'The Iron Warriors are well, but it is good to be back.'

'I assume there's much to discuss.'

'Of course,' the Chaplain replied.

'Come, then. We'll talk while the preparations are made for planetfall.'

The warriors walked past, and the orderly gathering began to dissolve into groups heading back to their duties. Just like that, it was over.

'You coming?' Marsin asked Ishaq.

Ishaq was looking down at his picter, intensifying the image on the small viewscreen. It showed the two commanders of the Gal Vorbak side by side, with the Blessed Lady nearby, her head tilted as she regarded them both with unseeing eyes – a look of adoring beneficence writ upon her lovely features. One of the Astartes carried his black crozius maul: the ornate weapon slung over his shoulder. The other, the cloaked Crimson Lord, sported deactivated claws of red iron, each oversized power fist ending in four talons the length of scythe blades.

Both suits of armour glinted with shards of yellow jade as they reflected the orange overhead lighting. Both helms had slanted, sapphire eye lenses that seemed to stare right into Ishaq's viewfinder.

This, he thought to himself, *might be another classic.*

'Are you coming?' Marsin repeated.

'What? Oh. Yes, sure.'

TWENTY-ONE

Machinations
A Curious Deception
Indulgence

'THESE REMEMBRANCERS,' XAPHEN said with an air of displeasure, 'are everywhere.'

'Ours arrived this month. It was not possible to deny them access to the fleet any longer.'

'Horus's flagship has had the little rats crawling over its decks for two years. Can you believe that?'

Argel Tal shrugged his shoulders, uncaring either way. 'Three of the poets read to the Blessed Lady, for which Cyrene is monumentally grateful. And I have a beautiful pict of *De Profundis* that one of them took on his first day. It almost stopped my heart to see the ship looking so grand.'

Xaphen chuckled. 'You are growing soft, brother.'

The two warriors had retired to Xaphen's prayer room, which was a rather immodest chamber by Argel Tal's standards. The Chapter Master preferred Spartan furnishings and a minimum of distraction, but Xaphen's personal reflection room was decorated in a plethora of banners and old prayer scrolls cast across the table and floor. Many of the banners were from victories fought with other Legions – as they talked, the Chaplain added another to the hallowed ranks. This one sported the metallic skull of the Iron Warriors, emblazoned with runes around the central symbol.

Several of them resembled Colchisian constellations. Argel Tal examined them each in turn. 'What are these?'

'Symbols of the Iron Warrior circles. They do not name them "lodges", as the Sons of Horus do.'

Argel Tal removed his helm with a click-hiss of air pressure. As always, the Chaplain's festooned chamber had the lingering twin-scent of dried spices and old incense.

'You were gone much longer than expected,' he said. 'Problems?'

'Nothing worth doing is ever easy.'

Argel Tal flexed his hands, closing and opening them from fists. They ached. They'd ached for days now.

'That doesn't answer my question.'

'There were no problems,' said Xaphen. 'I stayed longer because it seemed prudent. Their circles are large, taking up the overwhelming majority of the Legion, but it was a critical phase. I was not the only Chaplain there.'

Argel Tal raised an eyebrow, not realising he was mimicking Cyrene's bemused smirk out of habit. 'Oh?'

'Maloq Kartho was there to deal with another of the warrior circles, and I was treated to several of his sermons. The air fairly reeked of brimstone when he spoke. Var Valas was there, as well. Both were with the Iron Warriors after long tenures with the World Eaters.' Xaphen sighed – a satisfied sound to match the brightness in his eyes. 'The web is wide, brother. Lorgar's conspiracy spans the stars themselves. At last count, there are over two hundred of our Chaplains seconded to other fleets. Erebus now stands *at the Warmaster's side*. Can you give that countenance? Horus himself, heeding Erebus's words.'

Xaphen laughed as he trailed off. 'It begins, brother.'

Argel Tal didn't share his brother's relish. A scowl darkened features that had grown continually more scarred over the last half a century.

'I do not like that word,' he said, low and slow.

'What word?'

'The word you used. *Conspiracy.* It demeans the primarch's vision. It demeans us all.'

Xaphen smoothed the black war banner against the wall before stepping back to admire it. 'You are oversensitive,' he muttered.

'No, I am not. It is the wrong word, implying plotted schemes and ignoble secrecy.'

'Dress it however you wish,' the Chaplain said. 'We are the architects of humanity's ascension, and the web of necessary deceit is wide.'

'I choose to see it in nobler terms. Now finish what you have to say. I am releasing the Gal Vorbak, and have final preparations to make.'

The Chaplain sensed Argel Tal's recalcitrance. It was hard not to. 'You are angry with me.'

'Of course I am angry with you. I have five hundred warriors that haven't seen a Chaplain from their own Legion in almost a year. You were many months overdue, fighting with the Iron Warriors. Oros, Damane and Malaki are also still with Perturabo's lesser fleets, furthering the *conspiracy*.' He sneered through the word.

'What of Sar Fareth?'

'Dead.'

'What?'

'Killed ten months ago, shortly after you left. Slain by a human, of all things. An unlucky thrust with a wooden spear.' Argel Tal tapped two fingertips against his neck. 'Tore out most of his throat, laid it bare to the bone. I've never seen anything like it. Blood of the gods, I'd have laughed if it hadn't been so pathetically tragic. He bled out before the Apothecaries could reach him, still trying to shout the whole time.'

'What happened to his killer?'

Argel Tal had seen it himself. Sar Fareth had gripped the human's shoulder and leg, and *pulled*. The result came away in three bloody pieces before the Chaplain died.

'Justice happened.'

Xaphen released a breath that wasn't quite a sigh. Sar Fareth had been one of his own: trained by his hand to wield a crozius in Lorgar's name.

Argel Tal crossed his arms over his armoured chest. 'Will the Iron Warriors join us?'

The Chaplain's smile returned. 'Will they? Perturabo's Legion has already abandoned the Great Crusade. I was with them on Olympia.'

That couldn't be. 'Olympia?' Argel Tal managed to speak. 'So soon?'

'All of the primarch's plans are coming to fruition. That, in truth, is why I returned. Olympia was in open rebellion against the Imperium, and the Iron Warriors declared war against their own people in desperation to pacify their home world. Brother, you cannot imagine the sight. The skies were black with Perturabo's gunships and landers, while the ground shook from dawn to dusk under the wrath of half a million war machines.'

Argel Tal took a slow breath, forcing an unwilling imagination to picture Xaphen's words. 'A primarch has lost control of his own home world.'

'You speak as if you never believed this day would come.'

Argel Tal said nothing, motioning for the Chaplain to continue.

'All of it was orchestrated to the very finest degree. The Iron Warriors' wrath was a sight to behold. They have instigated genocide against their own people. What choice do they have now? The call will come soon: Horus is already gathering his forces, cleansing them of unworthy elements. The Emperor's Children, the Death Guard and the World Eaters are with him. The bulk of each Legion gathers in the Isstvan system, while Perturabo has betrayed the Imperium in his need for vengeance. He will stand with us when Lorgar throws off the False Emperor's shackles.'

The fervency in his voice wasn't new to Argel Tal, but without the presence of a Chaplain for almost a year, Xaphen's eager passion had faded from his memory. He found his brother's enthusiasm more unnerving than anything else.

'When do we travel to the primarch?'

'Soon.' The Chaplain met his brother's eyes. 'I told you, I returned because the time has come. Soon, the call will come from Terra.'

Xaphen activated the wall-screen, cycling through visuals of stellar cartography. He added layer upon layer of superimposed fleet markers. Argel Tal watched the display taking shape, so beautifully complex in its completion.

'Tell me what you see,' Xaphen said with a smile.

Argel Tal glanced at him. 'I see the death of my patience. I see my anger rising at how you hold all these answers purely by virtue of your position in the Chaplain brotherhood. I see me walking from this room without a straight answer given immediately.'

'Such vim,' the Chaplain chuckled. 'Very well. Here is the Isstvan system. Here, far across the western spiral arm, is Terra. Take note of the compliances being carried out in the subsectors closest to Isstvan. Now, humour me. What do you see?'

Argel Tal recognised symbolising runes from four Legions – and no others. It formed a curious pattern, notable for the lack of Imperial Army or Mechanicum battlefleets, as well as the total absence of many notable Legions.

'I see the hand of the Warmaster at work,' said Argel Tal. 'He has positioned certain fleets closest to him at Isstvan. These fleets could reach the system within a matter of days. Those on the outer arc will take longer, but… This is an immense gathering of force.' Argel Tal looked at Xaphen, reluctantly drawing his eyes from the twinkling stellar ballet. 'Now tell me why.'

'Forgive me, brother. Little did I realise the frustration of isolation you've suffered in a fleet burdened by Custodes presence. Your duty was to maintain the lie, and you've done so to perfection. But you are owed enlightenment.'

Xaphen cancelled the cartographic imagery and continued. 'Horus and Lorgar are already moving against the Emperor. The Warmaster has sworn devotion to the Hidden Gods, and now walks in their light. For now, the warp is pregnant with unrest, leaving much of the Imperium blind. Many of the established warp-paths are severed from each other by aetheric storms. The tumult will only grow worse, giving us enough time to enact the primarch's will without fear of Imperial retribution. Such is the

influence of the true gods. The warp itself is their canvas, and they paint to please us.'

The Master of the Serrated Sun let his scowl speak for him. He took offence to the way Xaphen insinuated they were no longer Imperial, purely for contemplating regicide. *We are overthrowing a stagnant and ignorant ruling order. We are bringing enlightenment to our people, not ending the empire.*

'Go on,' he said.

'A call will reach us soon – a panicked plea that every astropath in the fleet will hear at once. A call from Terra. The Emperor will soon learn of Horus's rebellion, and what choice does he have? He must order the closest Legions to destroy the Warmaster's traitorous forces.'

Argel Tal pictured the Legion signifiers flashing closest to the sun named Isstvan.

'Horus will be destroyed.'

The Chaplain laughed, relishing the moment. 'He will be entrenched on an impregnable world, commanding four Legions. What could destroy him?'

'The seven Legions tasked with doing so. Even with the Iron Warriors at our side, the other five Legions remain under the Emperor's aegis. Six against five. Our losses will be catastrophic. How can we illuminate Terra when the Legions sworn to Lorgar and Horus are bloodied and broken?'

Xaphen didn't answer immediately. His brother recognised something in his face – some creeping disquiet, close to the bladed edge of mistrust.

'Do you have such little trust in your own Legion's Chaplains, that our work has failed to turn the Night Lords, or the Alpha Legion? Lorgar has worked for half a century to spread the truth to those ears worthy of hearing it. Every Legion we need will be at our side. The loyalists will find nothing but extinction waiting for them on the surface of Isstvan V. They will never leave their dropsites alive, Argel Tal. I promise you that.'

'This *conspiracy*,' said Argel Tal, 'disgusts me.'

'It is the primarch's plan, brought into being by Horus himself.'

Argel Tal shook his head. 'No. This is not Aurelian's work. This is Erebus and Kor Phaeron's doing. Their treacherous stink comes off this vision in waves. Lorgar is a golden soul, a being of light. This shadowplay comes from the dreams of much smaller, darker men. The primarch, blessings upon him, loves that foul wretch. He embraces a viper to his breast and names it father.'

'You should not speak this way of the Master of the Faith.'

'Master of the…' Argel Tal laughed. 'Kor Phaeron? *"Master of the Faith"*? He coats himself in titles the way a killer's knife is laced with poison. Truly, I have been isolated from the Legion too long, if Kor Phaeron is now beloved of the masses. You of all people, Xaphen – you loathed him. *An impure soul. A false Astartes*. Your own words, brother.'

Xaphen looked away at last, unwilling or unable to hold the gaze any longer. Nothing broke eye contact like shame. 'Times change,' the Chaplain said.

'So it seems.' Argel Tal closed his hands into fists to ease the pain in his bones. It didn't work. His knuckles went on throbbing. 'Just get on with it. I have a world to bring to compliance.'

'If you please, I have questions of my own.'

'Ask,' said Argel Tal, 'and I will answer.'

'Cyrene,' Xaphen began. 'She has undergone more rejuvenation treatment.'

'Do not look at me, nor should you accuse her of vanity. An astropathic order came from the primarch himself some time ago. He still holds her in high regard, and expressed his desire that she go through another cycle of treatments.'

Xaphen nodded. 'And Aquillon?'

Argel Tal's expression was unreadable. 'As before. He knows nothing, and suspects even less. His messages to the Emperor never leave the fleet.'

'My failsafe?'

'Is still in effect.'

'Have you checked yourself?' The Chaplain knew his brother found certain methods distasteful. 'It is integral you check yourself.'

'I have,' said Argel Tal. 'Nothing has changed, put it from your mind.'

'Then I am sanguine. Nevertheless, I will renew the wards tonight.' He moved over to his writing desk, and unclasped a great book from where it was chained to his waist. Slowly, reverently, he leafed through the pages of the great, leather-bound tome – through pages and pages of elegant scripture, mathematical designs, astrological diagrams, chanted invocations and ritual formulae.

Argel Tal ached to step closer and read the secrets spilled from the primarch's mind. Truly, Lorgar was sharing a great deal with the Legion's Chaplain brotherhood.

'You have added much to the book,' he noted.

'I have. Each month, we receive new chapters and verses for the holy work. The primarch's mind is aflame with ideas and ideals, and we are honoured to hear them first. Thousand of epistles now grace these pages.'

The 1301st's databanks would never be allowed to archive digital copies of the primarch's scriptures, for such information could be accessed by the wrong souls. Instead, the Serrated Sun's Chaplains each carried their own copies chained to their armour – forever adding to them as the Word grew and spread – using them to preach at secret sermons. Argel Tal had taken Sar Fareth's *Book of Lorgar* from the Chaplain's corpse, incinerating it on the battlefield; committing necessary blasphemy to prevent the tome ever falling into unintended hands.

The Chaplain took a slow breath. 'I have been gone too long, Argel Tal. You're right. I was lost in manipulating the dull-witted labourers of the IV Legion, when in truth I desired nothing more than to be here with my brothers, preaching the evolving Word of Lorgar.'

'Apology accepted,' said the Crimson Lord. 'And you have thirty-eight minutes before planetfall. I will see you on the deck before the *Rising Sun*.'

Xaphen was reading the data screeds scrolling over his eye lenses. 'There's an order for the coming engagement, sanctioning

the presence of remembrancers during combat operations. That cannot be correct, for I know you would never acquiesce to such a thing.'

Argel Tal grunted something that wasn't quite an answer, and made his way to the door.

'Wait.'

Argel Tal froze, already at the chamber door. 'Yes?'

'Think of all that has come to pass, brother. Focus upon how events are flowing faster towards the inevitable insurrection. Are you feeling anything within you? Any… changes?'

The Chapter Master's hands ached with sudden ferocity. It was if his knuckles and wrists were hinged by broken glass.

Without knowing why he did it, Argel Tal lied.

'No, brother. Nothing. Are you?'

Xaphen smiled.

MAKING WAR UPON another human culture was always a distinct kind of poison, and Argel Tal loathed every time it became necessary.

These were unclean wars, and fought with bitterness bred into every soul doomed to take up arms against the Imperium. It wasn't that the enemy dared resist that discomfited the Crimson Lord, nor was it the expenditure of munitions or the fact each of these worlds was peopled by defenders he came to admire for their tenacity. Those aspects grieved him, but the waste of life and potential from their defiance – that was what left scars.

He'd tried to raise the point with Xaphen in the past. With characteristic bluntness, the Chaplain had lectured him on the rightness of their cause and the tragic need to crush these cultures. Such discussion told Argel Tal nothing he didn't already know. Similar talks with Dagotal and Malnor had progressed the same way, as had one with Torgal. The Gal Vorbak dispensed with all ranks outside of Argel Tal's own, rendering all its warriors equal under the Chapter Master, and the former assault sergeant had struggled hardest to understand what Argel Tal was trying to explain.

'But they are wrong,' Torgal said.

'I know they are wrong. That's the tragedy. We bring enlightenment through unification with mankind's ancestral home world. We bring hope, progress, strength and peace through unmatched might. Yet they resist. It grieves me that extinction is so often the answer. I pity them for their ignorance, but admire them for the fact they will die for their way of life.'

'That is not admirable. That's moronic. They would rather die being wrong than learn to embrace change.'

'I never said it was intelligent. I said it grieved me to reave a world clean of life because of ignorance.'

Torgal mused on this, but not for very long. 'But they're wrong,' he said.

'We were wrong once, too.' The Chapter Master held up a gauntleted fist to make the point: it was crimson, where it would once have been grey. 'We were wrong when we worshipped the Emperor.'

Torgal had shaken his head. 'We were wrong, and we adapted rather than be annihilated. I do not see the source of your grievance, brother.'

'What if we could convince them? What if the flaw is with us, that we merely lack the words to win them to our side? We are butchering our own species.'

'We are culling the herd.'

'Forget I mentioned it,' the Chapter Master conceded. 'You are right, of course.'

Torgal would not be moved. 'Do not mourn idiocy, brother. They are offered the truth and they have refused. If we had resisted the truth unto destruction, then we would have deserved our fate, just as these fools deserve theirs.'

Argel Tal hadn't tried again. A treacherous and unworthy thought plagued him in those grimmest moments – how much of his brothers' unquestioning belief was born of their own hearts, and how much was bred into them by their gene-seed? How many souls had he consigned to destruction himself, silently urged into bloodshed by sorcerous genetics?

Some questions had no answers.

Reluctant to burden Cyrene with his own troubles when she already served as confessor for hundreds of Astartes and Euchar soldiers, the only other time he'd spoken of his unease was with the one soul he knew he needed to guard against.

Aquillon understood.

He understood because he felt the same, sharing Argel Tal's subtle lament at the need to destroy entire empires simply because their leaders were blind to the realities of the galaxy.

The latest world to earn destruction was called Calis by its inhabitants, and 1301-20 by the 1301st Expeditionary Fleet. A planetwide invasion was in the making even as Calis's primitive orbital defences fell, burning, back into the atmosphere.

The population was sentenced to destruction on account of their dealing with xenos breeds. The purestrain human biological code of Calis's citizens had been unalterably corrupted by the introduction of alien genetics. The people of the world below would not surrender the exact details to the Imperium, but it was clear from blood samples that the Calisians had cultured alien deoxyribonucleic acid into their own cells at some point in time.

'Most likely to cure hereditary or degenerative disease,' Torvus suggested. But the reason was meaningless. Such deviation could not be tolerated.

General Jesmetine's Euchar regiments were tasked with taking hold of twelve major cities across Calis's scarce landmasses, each with support from several Astartes squads.

The capital city – a sprawl of industrial decay by the name of Crachia – was also the seat of the planetary ruler, who claimed the evidently hereditary title of 'psychopomp'.

It was this woman, Psychopomp Shal Vess Nalia IX, that had rebuffed the Word Bearers' emissaries. And it was this woman, swollen with corpulence, who had signed her culture's death warrant.

'Leave the capital untouched,' Argel Tal had informed Baloc Torvus at the preceding war council. 'I will release the Gal Vorbak upon Crachia and take their queen's head myself.'

The fleetmaster had nodded. 'And what of the remembrancers? They've barely been with us a fortnight, yet already I'm suffering hourly beseeching from their representatives, begging that they be allowed to witness an assault.'

The Crimson Lord shook his head. 'Ignore them. We are conquering a world, Baloc, not nursemaiding tourists.'

Baloc Torvus had grown deeply patient in his advancing age, which was one of the fleetmaster's many virtues that his men admired and his fellow commanders relied upon. Argel Tal saw the beginnings of cracks in that ironclad facade now, showing in the lines around the ageing man's eyes, and the way he adjusted his white cloak to calm himself before replying.

'With respect, lord—'

Argel Tal raised a hand in warning. 'Don't fall into formalities just because you disagree with me.'

'With respect, Argel Tal, I have been ignoring them on your behalf since their arrival, and for over a year before that. I have mouthed platitudes and composed missives refusing them access to the fleet, citing a hundred and more reasons that it would be inappropriate, impossible, or impractical to deal with them. Now they are here, and they come equipped with Imperial seals from the Sigillite himself, demanding that they be allowed to record the Great Crusade. Short of shooting them – and don't think I can't see that smile – how am I to continue delaying them?'

Argel Tal chuckled, the first break in his foul mood the fleetmaster had seen today. Whatever news the returning Chaplain had brought, it was not sitting well with the Chapter Master. 'I see your point. How many have joined the fleet?'

Torvus consulted a data-slate. 'One hundred and twelve.'

'Very well. Make them choose ten. We'll take them down with us in the first wave, and give them a minimal Army escort from the Euchars. The rest can follow once the landing zones are secure.'

'What if they encounter significant opposition?'

'Then they die.' The Crimson Lord made to leave the room. 'I do not care, either way.'

Torvus took several seconds to make sure Argel Tal wasn't joking.

'By your word.'

TWENTY-TWO

An Idea
Brothers
The Ordained Hour

ISHAQ WAS FAINTLY concerned that he was going to die down here, but that wouldn't stop him enjoying it while it lasted.

The other remembrancers whined on and on, badgering their Echuar aides about where would be best to observe the battle without actually getting anywhere near it. Apparently they'd forgotten the honour of getting sent down here shortly after first setting foot on solid ground. Most of them seemed dedicated to completely missing the whole point of making planetfall in the first place, but that was fine by Ishaq. He wasn't here to babysit their careers.

The ride down to the surface had been an uneventful drift through the afternoon sky – anticlimactic after all the tension of being selected, and boring enough for Ishaq to start wondering if there was really a war going on at all. The limited view from the dirty window had revealed a distant city of obviously human construction below.

Strange, to consider waging war against such a familiar scene.

Their lander was an Army troop transport, a shaking, rattling example of the ancient Greywing-class shuttles that he'd assumed were out of service these days, replaced by the smaller, sleeker Valkyries. Ishaq had looked at the boxy underslung compartment where the thirty passengers were evidently supposed to travel. He'd looked at the sloping wings, ran a gloved hand over the armour plating, pockmarked from battle and painted

with faded lightning bolts from the Emperor's Unification Wars on Terra two centuries before.

And he'd fallen in love.

He snapped several picts of the venerable old girl, pleased with each and every one of them.

'What's her name?' he asked the pilot, who was standing around with the two dozen Army soldiers on the hangar deck and looking just as annoyed.

'They didn't name them back when she was made. Too many, produced too fast, by too few facilities.'

'I see. So what do you call her?' He pointed at the faint, stencilled print along the hull: E1L-IXII-8E22.

The man thawed a touch at Kadeen's interest. 'Elizabeth. We call her Elizabeth.'

'Sir,' Ishaq grinned. 'Permission to come aboard your fine lady.'

So it'd started well. Once they were down, things took a turn for the worse. The officer in nominal command of their expedition wasn't an officer at all – he was a Euchar sergeant who'd drawn the short straw and had to babysit the gaggle of pretension and nervousness that made up ten highly-strung artists in a warzone.

Ishaq half-listened to the sergeant arguing with a handful of the other remembrancers about just where would be acceptable for them to enter the city. He was already bored, standing on the edge of a rise about three kilometres from the city limits. The place itself looked no different from any industrialised sprawl on Terra, and there weren't even any obvious signs of battle.

The nature of Astartes assault presented a problem for the people attempting to chronicle the event. A direct drop-pod attack against the palace meant the remembrancers had to cross an entire hostile city alone, or would remain outside the city limits and ultimately witness nothing at all. The former was never going to happen. The latter almost definitely was.

Ishaq Kadeen was a naturally suspicious soul, and he felt a bleak sense of humour behind all this. Someone, perhaps even the Crimson Lord himself, was making fun of them all. Inviting

them down here, but keeping them tediously safe and out of the way.

He trudged over to his minders: two men in the neat ochre uniforms of the Euchar 81st. Each of the remembrancers was similarly guarded. Ishaq's own sentinels looked both bored and annoyed all at once, which was quite a feat for human facial expressions.

'What if we just flew over to the palace?' he suggested.

'And get shot down?' The Euchar was practically spitting. 'That piece of shit would catch fire and fall out of the sky as soon as it came into range of the anti-air guns.'

With effort, Ishaq kept his smile cordial. 'Then fly really, really high, and come down sharp on top of the palace. Then find somewhere to land.' He demonstrated this feat of aeronautics with his hands. They didn't seem convinced.

'Not happening,' one of them said.

Ishaq turned without another word, heading back into the dark confines of the Greywing's passenger pod. When he emerged again, he had a plastek personal grav-chute pack tucked under one arm, clearly taken from the overhead storage lockers.

'Then how about this? We fly really damn high, and anyone who actually wants to do their job can jump out and do it.'

The two soldiers shared a glance, and called their sergeant over.

'What is it?' the sergeant asked. His face painted enough of a picture: he needed another whining artist like he needed a hole in his head.

'This one,' the soldier pointed at Ishaq. 'He's had an idea.'

It took twenty minutes for the idea to become reality, and Ishaq regretted it right about the same time he jumped out of the gunship and started falling.

Below him sprawled the white-stone palace, like something from Ancient Hellas in Terra's decadent past. It was coming up to meet him with surprising speed, while the wind was doing its best to beat him unconscious.

This, he thought, may have been a mistake.

He tapped the switches on his chest buckle that would engage the grav-chute. *First one, then the other. First one, then the other.*

'Wait twenty seconds before you switch it on,' the sergeant had said to the few of them that were making the drop. 'Twenty seconds. Understood?'

Wait twenty seconds.

The wind roared against him, and the ground swelled below. Was he going to be sick? He hoped not. The queasiness in his stomach flipped and bubbled. *Ugh.*

Wait twenty seconds.

No sign of anti-air fire, at least. He could make out a spot among one of the inner courtyards – a blackened stain where a red drop-pod had beached itself. That was a good place to start.

Wait twenty seconds.

How… How long had he been falling?

Oh, shit.

Ishaq looked up, through bleary goggles he could see his two minders above. Both were far, far higher than him, shrinking all the while. Even smaller, above them both, were the others who'd caught onto his plan and given it enough credence to come with him.

He flicked the switches, first the blue, then the red. For several moments, absolutely nothing happened. Ishaq continued his plummeting death-dive, too surprised to even swear. He started flicking the switches in random panic, little realising that by doing so he wasn't giving it time to warm up and engage.

The grav-chute finally kicked in hard enough to wrench the muscles in his neck, its gravity suspensors humming as they came alive. The late activation saved Ishaq from becoming a red smear along the wall of a palace tower, but he paid the price for distraction. Laughing with terror, he careened off the stone parapet, bouncing, giggling and trying not to soil himself as he tumbled through the air.

Forty-eight seconds later, the first of his minders touched down in the courtyard. He found Ishaq Kadeen a bloody mess, cradling

his picter in bruised hands as he sat on the grass, rocking back and forth.

'Did you see that?' he grinned at the soldier.

THREE REMEMBRANCERS, SIX Euchar soldiers – a strike force of nine souls, moving through the corridors of the palace. It was a scantly-decorated affair with little in the way of art or ornamentation. The architecture was all pillars and arched roofs, while uncarpeted stone floors led them deeper into the structure, which had all the charm and warmth of a mountaintop monastery.

When they'd first entered the palace, leaving the fire-blackened Astartes drop-pod behind, Ishaq had wondered how they'd know which way to go. It turned out to be a needless worry. They just followed the bodies.

Evidence of the Astartes' passing was everywhere. This wing of the palace was swept clean of life, with ruptured corpses left in place of traditional decoration. One of the other remembrancers, a whippet-lean imagist by the name of Kaliha, would pause every few minutes and compose a pict around the dead bodies. It was clear from the angle of her picter that she sought to avoid any real focus on the slain, perhaps leaving them as blurred images in the foreground.

Ishaq had no interest in chronicling this butchery – artfully, tastefully or otherwise. The ambitious, mercenary part of his brain knew there'd be no point: such work would never enter the most treasured archives. Truly morbid pieces rarely did. People on Terra wanted to see what was humanity was capable of creating, not the aftermath of what it destroyed. They wanted to witness their champions in moments of glory or struggling in righteous strife, not slaughtering helpless humans that resembled Terrans far more than the Astartes themselves did.

It was all about presentation, about presenting what people wanted to see, whether they knew it or not. So he left the bodies unrecorded.

He tried not to look at the corpses they passed. Their ruination was so brutally complete it was difficult to imagine that these gobbets of meat had ever been people. They hadn't just been killed, they'd been destroyed.

One of the soldiers, Zamikov, caught Ishaq's eye. 'Chainblades,' he said.

'What?'

'The look on your face. You're wondering what does this to a body. Well, it's chainswords.'

'I wasn't wondering that,' Ishaq lied.

'No shame in honest horror,' Zamikov shrugged. 'I've been with the Serrated Sun twelve years now, and I puked my way through the first two. The Crimson Lord's lot do messy work.'

They took a left, stepping through another broken barricade that had failed to do its job. Gunfire in the distance hastened their strides.

'I'd heard the Word Bearers always incinerated their enemies.'

'They do.' Zamikov hiked a thumb over his shoulder, at the corpses arrayed in various pieces around the furniture barricade. 'That'll come afterwards. First they kill, *then* they purify.'

'They come back to burn the dead after a battle? They actually do it themselves?'

Zamikov nodded, no longer looking over at the imagist. Ishaq noticed the shift in the soldier's stride – as soon as they'd heard the gunshots, each of the Euchars moved lower, faster, their lasrifles clutched tighter. It was like watching hive-street cats on the hunt for rats.

'They do it themselves. No funerary serfs or corpse-servitors for the Word Bearers. They're a thorough lot, you'll see.'

'I can already see.'

'That a fact?' Zamikov spared him a quick glance. 'What do you see here?'

'Bodies.' Ishaq raised an eyebrow. What kind of question was that?

'It's more than that.' The soldier looked ahead again. 'This entire wing of the palace is cleaned out, but we've doubled back on

ourselves more than once following the trail of dead. The Word Bearers aren't racing to the throne room. That's not how they do things. They're killing everyone in the palace first, room by room, chamber by chamber. That's punishment. That's being *thorough*. You understand now?'

Ishaq nodded, not sure what else to say.

The sound of gunfire was joined by the guttural whine of motorised blades. He felt his heart quicken. This was it: battle, seeing the Astartes fight. And hopefully, not getting shot at himself.

'Look alive,' the sergeant grunted. 'Rifles up.'

Ishaq didn't have a rifle, but with his face set just as stern as Zamikov's, he raised his picter.

When they caught up to the Word Bearers, the scene was nothing like he'd expected. Firstly, it wasn't a squad of Word Bearers, it was just one. And secondly, he wasn't alone.

The picter clicked and clicked and clicked.

THEY WERE TWINS in movement, a single weapon with a single intent. Neither led the other, neither moved any more or less than his twin. It was not competition. It was the perfection of unity.

They stopped as one, ending their advance to take stock of their surroundings. The city was in the throes of evacuation, for whatever good it would do the populace, and the air was a wailing morass of conflicting sirens audible even here within the palace. Platoons of defenders stood at every corridor corner and junction, armed with solid shot rifles that cracked and pinged harmlessly off Astartes armour.

The vox-network was calm. No cries for reinforcement. No demands for orders. The monotonous chanting so typical of Word Bearer squads was absent from the Gal Vorbak. Forty warriors, drop-podded into four sections of the royal castle, immediately splitting up to slaughter with muted grunts and growls.

Another barricade stood before the two advancing warriors, manned by dozens of the rifle-armed defenders in their ostenta-

tious white and gold garb. Puffs of smoke preceded the *click-clack-click* of their bullets sparking harmlessly aside.

Both warriors broke into a run, boots crunching into the stone floor. Both vaulted the barricade of smashed furniture in the same moment, both grunting in effort as they leapt. Both landed at the same time, and both let loose with abandon, their weapons lashing out to shed blood. The defenders fell in pieces around them, chopped and carved faster than the eye could follow.

Ruthless familiarity with each other was all that made this possible. When one would weave low to thrust, the other would aim high to slice. Their movements were a blurring dance around each other's forms, forever watching and anticipating the other's movements even as they focused on slaying their enemies.

Around the two warriors, nineteen defenders were twitching human wreckage. The last to die had been disembowelled and decapitated by both warriors in the same heartbeat.

Now blood ran from the sword's blade, just as it ran from the eight talons. Back to back, the warriors glanced at the ruination around them, took half a second's note of the Euchar escorting the remembrancers down the hallway, and moved on in the same second.

Aquillon ran.

Argel Tal staggered.

Surprise froze the Custodian's movements dead. As he turned, he saw the Word Bearer take another flawed step and crash to his knees among the corpses they'd created.

Aquillon span his blade – a deflective propeller to ward off any assassin's shot. He wasn't connected to the Legion's networked data-stream, and couldn't read Argel Tal's life signs on a convenient retinal display. But there was no blood. No sign of injury, beyond the collapse and spasm.

'Are you hit?'

Argel Tal answered with wordless rasps. Something wet and black dripped from his helm's mouth grille, thinner than oil, thicker than blood, hissing like acid as it fell to the stone.

Aquillon stood above the prone Word Bearer, sword spinning in his gold hands. No matter where he looked, he couldn't gain a target lock. There was no assassin – at least none that he could see. He risked another glance down.

'Brother? Brother, what ails you?'

Argel Tal used his claws to rise, digging them into the wall and dragging himself to his feet. Black bubbles, silvered by saliva, swelled and popped at his mouth grille.

'*Rakarssshhhk,*' he said, in a greasy blurt of vox. The twitching was subsiding, but the Word Bearer seemed in no hurry to move.

'What struck you down?'

'Hnh. Nothing. Nothing.' Argel Tal's voice was a breathy wheeze. 'I… Tell me you hear that.'

'Hear what?'

Argel Tal gave no answer. The scream in his mind went on and on, a sound of sorrow and anger somehow ripened by amusement – a meaningless melange of incompatible emotion, curdled into a single scream. Each second it lasted, his blood boiled hotter.

'Let's move on,' he growled at Aquillon through chattering teeth.

'Brother?'

'*Move on.*'

TORGAL SCREAMED IN unison with the distant cry, sending human defenders panicking before him. The Gal Vorbak warriors by his side dropped their weapons, hands clutching at helms, wordless shouts of anguish vox-roaring throughout the throne chamber.

Psychopomp Shal Vess Nalia IX watched this sudden madness through tears in her eyes. The ruler of the planet Calis had, before this moment, been curled in her oversized throne – a mess of rich robes containing rolls of fat – weeping and wailing for all to hear. The last survivors of her royal guard, those who'd not fled to leave her to die at the hands of the invaders, were similarly

taken aback now as the red-armoured slaughterers howled and ceased their butchery.

The guards' ceremonial blades were worthless against Astartes armour, as were their solid-shot rifles. Instead of pressing the attack, they used the momentary respite to fall back to the psychopomp's throne.

'Highness, it's time to leave,' a house-captain told her. This was a refrain he'd been trying for days, but if it wouldn't work now, at least he'd never need to try again.

She blubbed in response. Her chins jiggled.

'Forget her,' one of the others said. All of their faces were taut under the pressure of the invaders screaming so loud. 'This is our chance, Revus.'

'Defend me!' the matriarch wailed. 'Do your duty! Kill them all!'

Revus was fifty-two years old, and had served most loyally as house-captain to the current psychopomp's father, who'd been a charismatic and effective ruler beloved by his people – everything his fat bitch of a daughter was not.

But he couldn't leave. Or rather, he wouldn't.

Revus turned to the prone invaders, watching them kneel and cry out in the sea of carved corpses around them, and made the last decision he would ever make. He would not run. It was not in him to do so. Instead, he would defend his sire's indolent daughter with his life, breaking his blade upon the armour of his enemies, making sure his final words would be to spit defiance in their faces.

'Turn and run, dogs,' he snarled at his own men. 'I will die doing my duty.'

Half of them seemed to take that as an order, for they fled immediately. Revus watched their dark-armoured forms slipping into servants' passages, and despite himself, couldn't wish harm upon them for their cowardice.

The house-captain remained in the screaming maelstrom with eight men: all too proud or too dutiful to run, and all on the veteran side of forty.

'We're with you,' one of them said, his voice raised to make it above the shouts.

'Defend me!' the hideous girl wailed again. 'You have to protect me.'

Revus spoke a small prayer of reverence, wishing the shade of her father well, and promising to see him soon in the afterlife.

The invaders rose again. The screams faded to moans and grunts. They reached for weapons that had fallen into the gore.

Revus yelled *'Charge!'* and did exactly that.

He cared nothing for slaying one of the invaders, for he knew he couldn't. All he wished to do was break his blade upon their red armour – to land a single blow, when so many of the royal guard had died without even striking once.

One moment he ran and roared, the next, he was crashing to the floor. There wasn't even any pain as his legs went out from under him, just a moment of dizziness, before looking up to see the crimson warrior towering above. His blade remained unbroken. His last wish, denied.

The invader stepped on the dying man's chest, crushing every bone in his torso and pulping the organs. House-Captain Revus died without even knowing his legs and waist were three metres away, severed from his body by the red warrior's first blow.

Torgal dispatched the last of the ardent defenders, reaching the throne before the other Gal Vorbak. Acidic bile still stung his throat, but control and strength alike had returned to his limbs. The vox was a frenetic exchange of squads all reporting the same crippling pain and the sound of laughter.

'Leave my world!' the psychopomp squealed from her chair.

Torgal plucked her up by her fat neck. The weight was considerable, even for Astartes battle armour. He felt gyros in his shoulder and elbow joints lock to deal with the strain.

Next to him, Seltharis was replacing his helm after spitting black bile at one of the dead bodies. 'Just kill the piggish creature. We need to return to orbit. Something is wrong.'

Torgal shook his head. 'Nothing is wrong.' He did his best to ignore the girl's weeping protests. 'But we must commune with the Chaplain at once. If this is the ordained hour, we must—'

'What?' Seltharis was almost laughing. 'What must we do? I am hearing a spirit laughing inside my skull, while my blood boils hot enough to burn my bones. We have no plan for this. None of us truly believed it would ever come.'

'Leave my world!' the matriarch insisted. 'Leave us in peace!'

Torgal sneered at her behind his faceplate, loathing her down to the wretched, alien fish-stink of her sweating skin. What abominable event in this world's past had led to such deviancy? What could make such desecration – the corruption of the human genome with alien genetics – a necessary reality? These people seemed no stronger, no more enlightened, no more industrious than any other human culture. In truth, they were less advanced than most.

'Why did you do this to yourselves?' the Astartes asked.

'Leave my world! Leave!'

He threw her aside. The fleshy pile crashed to the ground, her dynasty ended by a broken neck.

'Burn everything,' ordered Torgal. 'Burn it all, and summon a Thunderhawk. We stand at the ordained hour. I will report to the Crimson Lord.'

THE CRIMSON LORD surveyed the courtyard. Empty, but for the grounded gunship.

He lowered his claws.

Torgal reported the monarch's downfall almost an hour before, but Argel Tal's fervour had faded even before the announcement. With the echo of that silent scream still drifting through his skull, he stood in the shadows of his Thunderhawk, *Rising Sun*, abstaining from the final slaughter within the palace. With flamers and incendiary grenades, the Gal Vorbak were erasing all evidence of royal life, gutting the pillared palace from within.

Most were voxing questions to one another, coating the communication network in a buzz of aggressive, amused voices. The

words *Ordained Time* surfaced with sickening frequency. Their blood was up, for it seemed the gods had called.

Aquillon had followed him, which was the first thing he expected, and the very last thing he needed. The four Custodes were scattered among the Word Bearers assaulting the palace. They had surely seen everything, and that was going to become a problem sooner rather than later.

Argel Tal watched the man he would soon be ordered to kill, and wondered if he were capable of the act, both physically and morally.

'I have no answer for you,' Argel Tal told him. 'I do not know what happened. A momentary weakness played over me. I forced it back. That is all I can tell you.'

The Custodes sighed through his helm speaker. 'And you are well now?'

'Yes. My strength returned quickly. There has been no moment of similar weakness.'

'My men report similar incidents,' the Custodian said. 'Many of the Gal Vorbak fell as if struck by unseen hands, at the same moment you lapsed yourself.' Aquillon removed his helm in a gesture of familiarity. It was a gesture that went unreturned. 'We have detected no enemy weaponry capable of creating such an effect.'

He could only meet Aquillon's gaze with his own eyes guarded by the lenses of his helm.

'If I knew what had afflicted me,' Argel Tal said, 'I would tell you, brother.'

'We have to consider that this is some previously unknown flaw in your Legion's gene-seed.'

Argel Tal grunted a vague noise that may or may not have been affirmation.

'You understand,' the Custodian continued, 'I must report this to the Emperor, beloved by all, at once.'

Behind his faceplate, Argel Tal was drooling blood again.

'Yes,' he said, licking his lips clean. 'Of course you must.'

AT FIRST, HE believed the scream was returning. Only after listening to its ululating wail for several moments did he turn back towards the palace walls.

'Do you hear that?' he asked.

This time, Aquillon nodded. 'Yes. I do.'

WHEN THE SIREN started, almost all of the Word Bearers requested confirmation of its origins. The Colchisian rune flickering across hundreds of retinal displays told a blunt, stark tale, but it was a story that made no sense.

Even among the Gal Vorbak, the red-clad warriors hesitated in their fire-bearing purges, voxing to the orbiting fleet for immediate confirmation and explanation.

IN THE COURTYARD, Argel Tal and Aquillon boarded the *Rising Sun*, ordering their warriors to return to their dropships without hesitation. The psychopomp's palace no longer mattered. This entire compliance was now meaningless.

'All Word Bearers, all Custodes, all Imperial Army forces of the 1,301st Expeditionary Fleet – hear these words. This is Argel Tal, Master of the Serrated Sun. Word has reached De Profundis *from Terra itself, bearing the seal of the Emperor. The Isstvan System is in open rebellion, led by four of our own Legions. Rumours are rife, and facts are few. It is said the Warmaster has renounced his blood-oaths to the Throneworld. True or false, we will not go to war blinded by ignorance. But we will answer the primarch's call, for Lorgar himself demands we respond.*

'Disengage from the surface attack, and regroup at your transports. Return to orbit at once. We are ordered to Isstvan, and we will obey as we were born to obey. The Word Bearers will cut to the heart of this betrayal, tearing the truth out from within. Officers, to your stations. Warriors, to your duties. That is all, for now.'

Aquillon stood with the Crimson Lord in the gunship's crew bay. 'I cannot give this even a moment's belief. Horus? A traitor?' The Custodian ran his fingertips over the flat of his sword's blade. 'This cannot be true.'

'You heard the message, just as I.' Argel Tal blink-clicked a runic marker on his visor display, opening a vox-channel to the Gal Vorbak.

'Confirm network security.'

Another rune twinned with the first, blinking in reassurance.

'This is Argel Tal,' he spoke only to his closest brothers now. 'Aurelian calls us.'

A voice answered without the aid of vox, drifting through his senses with maddening familiarity.

They already know. They sense it.

I know this voice, he thought.

Of course we know it. It is our own voice. We are Argel Tal.

TWENTY-THREE

Traitors
Possession
The Choice

THE ASTROPATH NODDED.

Aquillon was too stunned to even feel rage. 'Treason,' he said. 'How can this be?'

The astropath's name was Cartik, and at his full height he cut an unimpressively short figure, only made worse by both advancing age and a tendency to hunch his shoulders like an animal about to be attacked. The psyker was pushing seventy years of age with a face cracked by time's lines, and he'd hardly been spry even in youth. He was old now. It showed in everything he did, and how slowly he did it.

Surprisingly lovely eyes flickered about as they watched from beneath half-hooded lids, sunk into the sallow sockets of an ugly face formed by cruel genes and chubby cheeks. Upon seeing him once, a remembrancer had remarked that Cartik's mother or father – perhaps even both – were almost definitely rodents.

He'd never been skilled at cutting comebacks. His talents simply didn't lie in witticism. That was the last time he attempted to make friends among the newly-arrived civilians. He knew loneliness would drive him to try again, but was content to let it wait a while.

His position as personal astropath to the Occuli Imperator had brought his family on Terra a modest measure of wealth, though it had brought nothing but a lonely and boring indentured exile for himself. Such were the sacrifices made in this day and age.

He was content enough to do the Emperor's duty, safe in the knowledge that his family were well provided for.

Once or twice, remembrancers had come to him, seeking to use his position for their own ends, in their quest for stories to record and tales to tell. Cartik read the naked ambition in their eyes, as well as their utter disinterest in him, and made himself unavailable to such visitors. In truth, he'd grown used to the loneliness. He had no desire to be used just to escape it.

'I confirm it,' Cartik said. His speech, like his eyes, was deceptively pleasant. Not that anyone would ever know it beyond Cartik himself, but he had a wonderful singing voice, too. 'Exalted sire, the aether has cleared a great deal in recent days, and the message from Terra was clear. It has come to treason.'

Aquillon looked at the others gathered in Cartik's isolated chamber. Kalhin, the youngest, with barely nine names in the Emperor's service. Nirallus, with his breastplate bearing twenty name-etchings, and the best of them all with a guardian spear. Sythran, still keeping his vow of silence sworn atop one of the few remaining mountains of Himalaya, looking up at the walls of the Imperial Palace. He viewed their assignment as penance, and would never speak a word until they returned to Terra in seven more years, at the completion of their five-decade service.

'Four Legions,' said Kalhin. 'Four entire Legions have betrayed the Emperor.'

'Led by the Warmaster,' Cartik added to their discussion with awkward softness. 'The Emperor's most beloved son.'

Nirallus breathed out something between a snort and a laugh. '*We* are the Emperor's most beloved sons, little warp-speaker.'

Aquillon ignored the old argument. 'Argel Tal informs me we will reach Isstvan in thirty-nine days. Upon arrival, the Serrated Sun will rejoin the Legion and deploy alongside the other Word Bearers. No Army, Mechanicum or external forces are to join the assault, including us. This is an Astartes concern, apparently. They wish us to take command of four smaller vessels, to aid in repelling boarders. I have acquiesced to this.'

The others turned to him. Most nodded in acceptance at the honour offered to them, though they were still troubled.

'Thirty-nine days?' asked Nirallus.

'Yes.'

'That is incredulously quick,' Kalhin said. 'We've spent years pushing through turgid tides and bringing backwater worlds to compliance, and suddenly the Navigators are reporting clean warp-lanes all the way to where we need to be? A quarter of the way across the galaxy? That journey should take a decade.'

'The warp has cleared,' reiterated Cartik.

'In good tides, it is still a journey of many months. Even years.'

Aquillon looked down at Cartik. One by one, so did the others.

'Yes, Occuli Imperator?' the man said.

'Inform the Sigillite that we await his orders. The Astartes are resistant to exterior forces taking part in the coming battle, but we will be spread across the Word Bearers' fleet, commanding four of their vessels.'

'By your word,' Cartik said reflexively. It would be a long night of pulsing so urgent a message all the way to Terra, and maintaining a link with an astropath on the distant home world long enough to carry a reply. 'It will be as you wish.'

The Custodians left the room without saying another word.

ARGEL TAL SHIVERED in his armour, cold despite the heat, icy sweat drenching his skin before it was absorbed into the layers of his armour and recycled back into his body.

The scraping of heavy ceramite on steel decking was a rhythmic rasp, screeching each time his body gave another shudder in time to his heartbeat. He'd tried to stand countless times. Each attempt met with failure, crashing back down to the floor of his meditation chamber, denting the deck and chipping paint from his armour.

An open vox-channel to the other Gal Vorbak brought him their curses and murmured prayers, but he could neither recall opening the link, nor remember exactly how to close it. They suffered

as he suffered. Most didn't sound capable of speech, either – their voices lost in feral, ragged snarls.

The door signal chimed once.

Argel Tal released a low growl, needing several moments to form a single word.

'Who?'

The wall-speaker hissed. 'It is Aquillon.'

The Word Bearer turned watering eyes to his retinal chron, seeing the digital runes counting up. He had forgotten something. Some… event. He couldn't think clearly. Saliva stringed between his aching teeth.

'Yes?'

'You were not present at our sparring.'

Yes, that was it. Their daily spar.

'Apologies. Meditating.'

'Argel Tal?'

'Meditating.'

There was a pause. 'Very well. I shall return later.'

Argel Tal lay on the decking, shivering and whispering mantras in the language at Colchisian's core, freed of its Terran and Gothic roots.

At one point, lost in a haze of pain, he'd drawn his combat blade. In a trembling grip, he used the sword to slice the palm of his gauntlet, seeking to release the burning from his blood. What dripped from the wound was like boiling oil, bubbling and popping, and it ate into the deck floor in hissing rivulets.

The slice closed the way a smile slowly fades. Even the cut in his armour resealed with disgustingly organic scarring.

He managed to haul himself to his feet after another hour had passed, composing himself enough to stand without trembling. Over the vox, his warriors were laughing, weeping, betraying emotion after emotion rarely heard from the throats of Astartes.

'Xaphen.'

The Chaplain evidently needed several long seconds to reply. 'Brother.'

'We must… hide this from the Custodes. Spread the word. The Gal Vorbak are to be sequestered in meditation. Penance. Contemplation as we travel to Isstvan.'

'We can just kill them.' Xaphen barked the words over the vox-network. 'Kill them now. The time has come.'

'They die,' Argel Tal swallowed a gobbet of acid, 'when the primarch says they die. Spread the word across the ship. The Gal Vorbak is suffering penance, and refuses all outside contact.'

'By your word.'

In the background, his brothers were screaming and howling. The sound of fists and foreheads crashing against walls transmitted over the vox in dull clangs. He couldn't breathe. He had to get his stifling helmet off; even the ship's warm, recycled air was better than choking in this ashes-and-ember reek.

Fingers clasped at his collar seals, but each tug jerked his whole head. The helm wouldn't come free. Cold sweat, somehow, had cemented it to his face.

Argel Tal moved to the doorway, pressing the activation plate. Once the door was open, the Crimson Lord broke into a staggering, lurching run, moving down the corridors, seeking the one place of refuge his disoriented mind could focus upon.

'ENTER,' SHE CALLED.

The first thing she heard was the servo-snarl of armour joints with the booted thunder of Astartes tread. She opened her mouth to speak, but the smell silenced her. Aggressively strong, the potent chemical iron-reek of melting metal, with the ashen scent of burning coal.

The footsteps were uneven, leading into her chamber, and ended with a crash of ceramite on metal that shook her bed. In the wake of the crash, the door sealed again. She sat on the edge of her sleeping mattress, staring blindly where she'd heard the Astartes fall.

'Cyrene,' the warrior spoke. She knew him instantly, despite the strain in his voice.

Without a word, she slipped from the bed, feeling for where he'd fallen. Her hands brushed the smooth armour of his shin guard, and the tattered oath paper that hung there. With that as her frame of reference, she moved up, until she sat by the warrior's shoulders, cradling his heavy helm in her lap.

'Your helmet will not come off,' she said.

This was his face now: this image of slanted eyes and snarling ceramite. He didn't answer.

'I… I will summon an Apothecary.'

'Need to hide. Lock the door.'

She did so with a spoken command.

'What is wrong?' There was no concealing her concern, or her rising panic. 'Is this what Xaphen spoke of? The… the ordained change?'

So the Chaplain had already told her everything. He knew he was foolish to be surprised by that fact – Xaphen had always shared all with the Blessed Lady, using her as yet another instrument in his spread of the new faith among the Legion and the serfs alike. Argel Tal blinked sweat from stinging eyes before he replied. A targeting lock outlined Cyrene's face above him, and he voided it with gritted teeth.

'Yes. The change. The ordained hour.'

'What will happen?' The unease in her voice was an aural nectar. Through a perception he didn't quite understand, Argel Tal felt stronger when he heard the break in her breathing… the way her heart beat faster… the warmth of fear in her voice. Tears fell onto his faceplate, and even this made his muscles bunch with fresh strength.

We feed on her sorrow, the thought rose unbidden.

'Are you dying?' she asked through her tears.

'Yes.' His own answer shocked him, because he'd not expected it, and yet knew it was true the moment he spoke it. 'I think I am.'

'What should I do? Please, tell me.' He could feel her fingertips stroking along the faceplate of his helm, cool to the touch, sooth-

ing some of the pain. It was as if her cold fingers rested directly against his feverish skin.

'Cyrene,' he growled, his voice barely his own. 'This is the primarch's plan.'

'I know. You won't die. Lorgar wouldn't allow it.'

'Lorgar. Does whatever. Must be done.'

He felt his voice growing fainter as he fell, drifting and slipping back from awareness as if into a sleep forced by narcotics. With ringing echoes, his thoughts split into an uncontrollable duality.

He could see her, her closed eyes that still trailed tears, her tumbling locks of chestnut hair curtaining down around her face. But he could see more: the pulse at her temple, where the vein quivered beneath her thin, too-human skin; *The wet, crumpling boom of her heartbeat, pumping liquid life through her fragile body. The scent of her soul, escaping moment by moment throughout her entire life, breathed from her body until her body would breathe no more. She smelled alive, and she smelled vulnerable.*

Somehow, that fired his hunger, like battle-lust, like starvation, but more potent than both – fierce enough to pain him. Her blood would tingle on his tongue, and sing through his digestive tract. Her eyes would be sweet balls of chewy, mouth-watering paste. He would break her teeth and swirl the shards around his mouth, before pulling her tongue from her bleeding lips and swallowing the severed length of flesh whole. Then she would scream, gurgling and tongueless, until she bled to death before him.

She was prey. Human. Mortal. Dying, minute by minute, and her spirit was destined to swim in the Sea of Souls until devoured by one of the Neverborn.

She was also Cyrene. The Blessed Lady. The one soul he'd come to at the nadir of his life, as his body broke and his faith broke alongside it.

She would be a joy to destroy. Her sorrow would sustain him, even enrichen him.

But he would not harm her. He could, but he would not. The wrath, born from nowhere, faded in the face of this realisation.

He was not enslaved to his feral needs, despite their urgent strength.

He would never abandon his brothers, or shirk from Lorgar's vision. Everything was a choice, and he would choose to suffer through this as the primarch had intended for him, carrying the changes so that others would never have to. Humanity would live on through the strength of the chosen few.

'Argel Tal?' she spoke his name as she always spoke it, with a curious gentleness.

'Yes. We are Argel Tal.'

'What's happening?'

He managed a reassuring smile. It split the ceramite of his helm, and the faceplate smiled with him. She couldn't see the daemonic visage leering up at her.

'Nothing. Only the change. Watch over me, Cyrene. Hide me from Aquillon. I can control this. I will not harm you.'

He raised a hand, watching through swimming vision as the edges of everything grew blurry and indistinct. A bladed claw met his stare, a human hand coated in cracked crimson ceramite, the black talons stroking her hair with inhuman care. For a time, he simply watched his new claws catch what little light existed in the room's ever-present darkness – the metal of his armour now an epidermis of ceramite, and the claws of his gauntlets now the talons of his own hand.

'Your voice is different,' she said.

His vision focused, the blurs fading, gelling into acuity. The claw was no more than his own gauntleted hand, as human as it had always been.

'Do not worry,' Argel Tal told her. 'One way or another, it will be over soon.'

THE GAL VORBAK did not remain in seclusion for long. Most emerged from their sealed chambers within a handful of nights. Xaphen was the first, leaving his chamber seemingly unchanged, though he was never without his helm as he travelled the ship's decks. A brazier burned at all times from its cage mounting on

his power pack, trailing the scent of ashes and coals wherever he went. He spent his time visiting the other Gal Vorbak in their meditation chambers, allowing no other visitors.

Argel Tal left Cyrene's chamber after three nights. Aquillon was in the sparring halls, just as the Word Bearer had expected.

'I had a feeling you'd be here,' he said.

The Custodes stepped back from one another: Aquillon had been duelling with Sythran, both of them wielding live weapons and wearing full armour, including their crested helms.

Sythran deactivated his guardian spear, the spear blade turning off with a snap of discharged energy. Aquillon lowered his blade, but left it active.

'A long meditation,' he said, watching through ruby eye lenses.

'Is that suspicion in your voice, brother?' Argel Tal grinned behind his faceplate. 'I had a great deal to dwell upon. Sythran, may I borrow your spear? I wish to duel.'

Sythran turned his head to Aquillon, saying nothing. The Occuli Imperator spoke for him. 'Our weapons are keyed to our genetic spoor. They would not activate in your hands. As an addendum, it is considered the height of insult for one of us to let another touch the blades issued into our care by the Emperor himself.'

'Very well. I meant no offence.' Argel Tal moved to the weapon rack, donning a battered, ancient pair of power claws over his gauntlets. 'Shall we?'

Aquillon's golden helm tilted slightly. 'Live weapons?'

'Duellem Extremis,' Argel Tal confirmed, tensing his fists to activate the electrical power fields around the long claws.

Sythran left the practice cage, sealing his commander and the Crimson Lord within. He'd seen Argel Tal and Aquillon cross blades on hundreds of occasions, and an educated, experienced estimate would see the Word Bearer defeated within sixty to eighty seconds.

The commencement chime sounded. Eleven clashes and five seconds later, the bout was over.

'Again?' enquired the Astartes. He heard Sythran's quiet exhalation in place of speech. Aquillon said nothing, either.

'Is something amiss?' Argel Tal asked. With the claws on his gauntlets, he couldn't offer a hand to help Aquillon rise.

'No. Nothing is amiss. I had not expected you to attack, that is all.'

The Custodian regained his feet, his own armour joints humming as false muscles of machine-nerve and cable-sinew flexed and tensed.

'Again?'

Aquillon hefted his long blade. 'Again.'

The two warriors flew at one another, each strike flashing aside with bursts from their opposing power fields. Every second saw three strikes made, and each strike snapped back with the weapons' electrical fields repelling one another after the metal kissed for the briefest moment. The air was rich with the ozone scent of abused power fields in only a matter of heartbeats.

This time, the two warriors were more evenly matched. Argel Tal's strength lay in his awareness, not only of his own blade work but his enemy's potential, betrayed by their own movements. It had always allowed him to stand his ground against superior weapon-masters, such as Aquillon, for a respectable amount of time before being unable to deflect the winning blow. Now he coupled that perceptive gift with speed to match the Custodian's, and Aquillon was forced to bring desperate defensive strokes to bear for the first time in any of his duels with Argel Tal.

He gleaned the flaw in the Word Bearer's sudden thrusts – that edge of indelicacy, the suggestion of imperfect balance – and struck out when the next opportunity presented itself. The flat of his blade crashed against Argel Tal's breastplate, sending the Astartes stumbling back. Aquillon's lips were already creasing into a smile as the crimson-clad warrior thudded to the deck.

'There. The balance is restored. You are back where you belong: on the floor.'

Argel Tal's voice told of the grin behind his faceplate. 'I almost had you.'

'Not a chance,' the Custodian replied, wondering why it was suddenly true. 'But you are different, brother. Energised. Vital.'

'I feel different. Forgive me for now – I have duties to attend to.'

'By your word,' said the Custodian.

Both Aquillon and Sythran watched the Astartes leave. In the silence afterward, Aquillon said 'Something has changed.'

Sythran, true to his vow of silence, merely nodded.

TWENTY-FOUR

Isstvan V
Traitors
In Midnight Clad

ISSTVAN – AN UNREMARKABLE sun, far from Terra, precious Throneworld of the Imperium.

The system's third world, comfortably close enough to the sun to support human life, was a virus-soaked mass grave marking the anger of Horus Lupercal. The world's population was nothing more than contaminated ash scattered over lifeless continents, while the bones of their cities remained as blackened smears of burnt stone – a civilisation reduced to memory in a single day. The orbital bombardment from the Warmaster's fleet, payloads of incendiary shells and virus-laden biological warfare pods, had seemingly spared nothing and no one anywhere in the world.

Isstvan III lingered now in silent orbit around its sun, almost grand in the extent of its absolute devastation, serving as the scarred tombstone for the death of an empire.

The system's fifth planet was a colder globe, able to support only the most resistant and genetically valiant life. Its skies were thick with storms, its skin was scabbed by tundra, and nothing on the face of the world promised an easy life for any that would settle upon it.

Ringing Isstvan V was one of the largest fleets ever gathered in the history of the human species. Without a doubt, it was the most impressive coalition of Astartes vessels, with the scouts, cruisers, destroyers and command ships of seven entire Legions.

The matt-black hulls of the Raven Guard's vessels blended into the void around their flagship, the sleek, vast and vicious *Shadow of the Emperor*. In a tighter formation, the green armour-plated warships of the Salamanders clustered in orbit around their primarch's vessel, the immense *Flamewrought*, its edges and battlements bedecked in leering, draconic gargoyles of burnished bronze.

A much smaller fleet hovered in the high atmosphere, comprised almost entirely of smaller escorts around the hulking capital ship *Ferrum*, marked the presence of the Iron Hands. The vessels were denser, their armour thicker, and their black hulls were trimmed with gunmetal grey and polished silver. The Iron Hands had sent their elite companies, while the bulk of the Legion's fleet remained en route.

Of the enemy fleet, there was no sign at all. The vessels of the Death Guard, the Emperor's Children, the World Eaters and the arch traitorous Sons of Horus were gone – hidden from Imperial eyes and the Emperor's vengeance.

In preternatural concordance, hundreds of vessels drifted closer to the world from the system's farthest reaches. Clad in armour of midnight-blue, the warships at the vanguard bore the skullish insignia and bronze statuary of the Night Lords Legion. The Iron Warriors drifted alongside their brothers, bastion-ships of composite metals and dull iron ceramite barely reflecting the stars. The vessels of the Alpha Legion formed the peripheries of the massed fleet, their sea-coloured hulls painted with stylised scales in honour of the reptilian beast they'd taken as their symbol. Embossed hydras snarled into space from their places along the ships' hulls.

At the core of the approaching armada, with more warships than any of their brother Legions, came the stone-grey battlefleet of the Word Bearers. The XVII Legion flagship, *Fidelitas Lex*, carved its way closer to the world ahead, massive engines vibrating with the gentle power of an approach vector's thrust.

So many vessels breaking from the warp at once should have been a maelstrom of colliding hulls and spinning junk, yet the

armada coasted closer to Isstvan V with maddening calm, safe distances maintained between every craft, and the void shields of each ship never once coming into crackling contact.

With a precision that required mass calculation, the fleets of seven Astartes Legions hung in the skies above Isstvan V. Shuttles and gunships ferried between the heaviest cruisers, while the decks of every warship made ready to deploy their warriors in an unprecedented, unified planetfall.

Horus, traitorous son of the Emperor, was making his stand on the surface. The Imperium of Man had sent seven Legions to kill its wayward scion, little knowing four of them had already spat on their oaths of allegiance to the Throneworld.

THE CELLAR WAS crowded with the remembrancers and off-duty Army grunts barred from the operations decks. Ishaq shouldered his way through to the bar, earning a score of annoyed grunts and tutted threats that he knew wouldn't ever go anywhere near an actual confrontation.

He ordered a plastic beaker (no expenses spared here in the Cellar) of whatever engine grease had been recently brewed without being immediately fatal. In payment, he scattered a few coppers on the bar's stained wooden surface. In their absence, his pockets were distinctly empty.

Around him, the conversations were all keyed to the same subject. The planetfall. The betrayal. Horus, Horus, Horus. What he found most interesting was the tone such discussion was taking. *'The Emperor abandoned the Great Crusade.' 'Horus was betrayed by his father.' 'The rebellion is justified.'* It went on and on, just as it had been doing for over a month now, during the entire time the fleet had been in the warp.

Ishaq tapped one of the nearest drinkers on the shoulder. The man turned, showing a face with an interesting geography of scars. He wore Euchar fatigues, and a holstered sidearm.

'Yes?'

'So tell me *why* you think this is all justified,' Ishaq said. 'Because it just sounds like treason to me.'

The Euchar trooper sneered and turned back to his friends. Ishaq tapped him on the shoulder again.

'No, really, I'm interested in your perspective.'

'Piss off, boy.'

'Just answer the question,' Ishaq smiled.

The Euchar gave a grin that would have been more threatening if he didn't have flakes of his last meal caught between his teeth. 'The Warmaster conquered half the galaxy, didn't he? The Emperor's been hiding back on Terra for half a century.'

Typical soldier logic, Ishaq thought. While one man dealt with the incomparable scale of managing an entire interstellar empire, he was infinitely less respected than the man who waged war in the most simple, aggressive terms, and always from positions of tactical, numerical and materiel supremacy.

'Let me get this straight,' Ishaq feigned a thoughtful expression. 'You admire the man who has armies large enough never to lose a single war, but loathe the man responsible for the vision and effort of actually maintaining the Imperium?'

The Euchar scoffed at Ishaq's description, and turned his back on the remembrancer. For just a moment, the imagist wondered if he was missing some key point in all this. The Word Bearers were here under Imperial orders, summoned to help put down Horus's rebellion. Yet here, the human staff and crews of the expeditionary fleet were practically united in favour of Horus's actions.

He sipped the drink and immediately regretted it.

'Delicious,' he said to the girl behind the bar.

The talk rattled on around him. Ishaq let it filter in, as he did most nights, listening without speaking, eavesdropping without being brazen about it. He was a passive seeker of public opinion. Easier to avoid fights that way – the Cellar had become a little more 'fisticuffy' since the soldiers had started drinking here too.

'The Word Bearers won't attack Horus,' one voice said with solemn surety.

'It's not a war. They're here to negotiate.'

'It'll be a war if the negotiations fail.'

'The Emperor is a relic of the Unification Wars. The Imperium needs more from its leaders now.'

'Horus hasn't even committed any crime. The Emperor is overreacting out of fear.'

'It won't come to battle. Lorgar will see to that.'

'The Emperor won't even leave Terra to deal with this?'

'Does he even care about the Imperium?'

'I heard Horus will lead the other primarchs to Terra.'

Ishaq left his drink unfinished as he headed back to his personal chamber on the communal civilian deck. He wanted to believe he had only so much stomach for bad beverages and seditionist ideology, but the truth was far more prosaic. He didn't have much money left.

Halfway to his room, he decided to change his course. Sitting bored in his chamber yet again wouldn't achieve anything, and even without the coin to get pleasantly drunk, he could do what he'd done back in those first nights after joining the Legion's fleet. It was a duty that had, for better or worse, lapsed in recent weeks. His endless attempts to arrange a meeting with one of the Gal Vorbak were rebuffed each and every time. The crimson warriors' seclusion was ironclad, and it was rumoured even the Custodes were barred from accessing their meditation chambers. The continuous refusals and lack of battle had dulled the remembrancer's ambitious interest somewhat, but with nothing else to do, it was time to get back in the game.

Ishaq checked his picter's battery cell, and went off in search of something that would make him famous.

THE PRIMARCH WAS waiting for them.

As they disembarked from the *Rising Sun* and onto the main hangar platform of *Fidelitas Lex*, Lorgar stood in full warplate, the massive crozius maul Illuminarum in his grey fists. At his side, Erebus and Kor Phaeron wore their own granite-dark armour, the surfaces of each armour plate etched with invocations from the Word. Behind them, the entire First Company formed an imposing welcome in their overbearing suits of Terminator

wargear, bearing double-barrelled bolters and long blades in brutish fists.

Lorgar's benevolent countenance broke into a warm smile as the thirty-seven crimson warriors walked onto the hangar deck. As one, they went to their knees before their liege lord.

Lorgar gestured for them to rise. 'Are your memories so short? My Gal Vorbak need never kneel before me.'

Argel Tal was the first back to his feet, noting the distaste upon Kor Phaeron's aged features. He growled, baring his teeth at the first captain as his gauntlet claws extended.

Lorgar chuckled at the display. 'My prayers are answered,' the primarch continued, 'for you have arrived.'

'As ordered,' said Argel Tal and Xaphen in the same moment.

The Gal Vorbak had little cohesion in their ranks. There was no pretence of standing at attention or gathering in orderly rows. They stood together but alone, each one remaining among their brothers yet guarding their personal space with narrowed eyes behind crystal blue helm lenses.

'We make planetfall within the hour,' Lorgar said. 'Argel Tal, Xaphen, for now, I would have you come with us. You will rejoin your brothers before we commence the assault.'

'Very well,' said Argel Tal.

'The Custodes?' Lorgar asked. 'Tell me they still live.'

'They still live. We have them scattered on four separate vessels, assigned with "overseeing the defence" if the vessels are boarded in the coming battle.'

'They know there will be a battle?' Lorgar rounded on Argel Tal.

'They are not fools, nor are they inured to news as it spreads from ship to ship. They are placed on four vessels that are… delayed… in the warp. Their Navigators and captains have been appraised of the situation's delicacy, sire. The Custodes will not arrive until the Battle of Isstvan is won.'

Xaphen broke in. 'They were spared, as you ordered.' He ignored Argel Tal's glare, feeling it despite the fact his brother still wore his helm.

'It was not my order – at least not in recent years.' The primarch gestured to Erebus, who inclined his head in turn. 'The First Chaplain has demanded they remain alive all this time. He weaves the plans that require them alive.'

Argel Tal said nothing, though he openly radiated annoyance. Xaphen was less restrained. 'Erebus?' he asked, smiling behind his faceplate. 'I have paid heed to every addendum and subscript in the *Book of Lorgar*, brother. I've used many of your new rituals myself. I would be keen to learn more of this one.'

'In time, perhaps.'

Xaphen thanked the other Chaplain as the group moved on. Erebus remained closest to the primarch as they walked away – his stoic, tattooed features as stern and dignified as ever. Kor Phaeron stalked in their wake, the heavy gear-joints of his Terminator armour grinding with each step. Xaphen kept his actions the very mirror of Erebus's, but Argel Tal glanced at the First Captain with a smile.

'What amuses you, brother?' the ageing half-Astartes asked.

'You do, old one. You reek of fear. I pity you, that they never bred the human terror out of your bones.'

'You think I feel fear?' The scarred face twisted into something even sourer. 'I have seen more than you know, Argel Tal. We have not been idle in the true Legion, while you danced at the galaxy's edge, playing nursemaid to the Custodes.'

Argel Tal merely chuckled, the laugh leaving his helm in a low growl of crackling vox.

THE *FIDELITAS LEX* played host to a gathering of rare significance.

Upon entering the war room, Argel Tal couldn't hold back an exhalation of awe. He'd been expecting a gathering of Word Bearer captains, Chaplains and Chapter Masters. He'd not anticipated the presence of commanders from the Night Lords, Alpha Legion and Iron Warriors, let alone the three figures that stood around the central hololithic table.

The crowds parted, allowing Lorgar to proceed to the centre, where he stood alongside his brothers. None of the three welcomed him, just as none of them seemed overly respectful to each other, either.

Argel Tal grunted acknowledgement of the two captains closest to him as he took his place at the front of the gathered Astartes. Their heraldry offered their identities in flowing Nostraman script: the first – a tall, austere warrior with bronze-plated skulls hanging from his pauldrons on iron chains, bore the numerals of 10th Company, and the name-etching *Malcharion.*

The second needed no declarations of identity, for everyone knew him as soon as their eyes rested upon him. His armour was wreathed in stretched, leathery patches of flayed flesh, and his helm's faceplate was a skullish glare of bleached bone. His was a name spread across the Imperium, almost as notable as that of Abaddon of the Sons of Horus, Eidolon of the Emperor's Children, Raldoron of the Blood Angels… or even the primarchs themselves. Argel Tal inclined his head in respect to Sevatar, First Captain of the Night Lords Legion. The warrior nodded in return.

'You are late,' his voice issued forth as a grinding snarl.

Argel Tal didn't rise to the Night Lord's bait. 'How perceptive of you,' he replied. 'You can read a chronometer.'

A guttural grunt of amusement issued from Sevatar's skull-painted helm.

In the centre of the gathered leaders and lords, Lorgar raised his hands for silence. The baiting, grumbling and occasional laughter between the Astartes died down.

'Time is short,' said the golden primarch, 'and events are already in motion. Those of us in this room are under no illusions as to what we face. Eight Legions, of which we are four, and countless worlds are rising in rebellion against the Imperium. If we are to march on Terra and take the throne, we must annihilate those Legions remaining loyal to the Emperor. And we must do so alone. No matter how loyal our Army regiments are, they will be devastated if they are committed to the surface of Isstvan. So

we wage war without them: Astartes against Astartes, brother against brother. There is a poetry to that I am sure you will all appreciate.'

No one said a word. Lorgar continued.

'You have all walked different paths, but together, we come to the same destination. The Emperor has failed us. The Imperium has failed us all.'

Here, Lorgar nodded to the largest gathering of Night Lords in their lightning-streaked warplate. 'It has failed us by the laxity of its laws, the decadence of its culture, and in the injustices heaped upon those of us who served most loyally.'

He gestured to the bare metal ceramite of the Iron Warrior captains. 'It has failed us by never recognising our virtues, never rewarding us for the blood we have shed in bringing about its ascendancy, and never providing unity when we needed it most.'

The Alpha Legion stood impassive and silent in their scaled armour. 'It has failed us,' Lorgar inclined his head to them, 'by being flawed to its core, imperfect in its pursuit of a perfect culture, and in its weakness against the encroachment of xenos breeds that seek to twist humanity to alien ends.'

Finally, the primarch turned to his own captains, their grey armour decorated with prayer scrolls. 'And it has failed us, most of all, by being founded upon lies. The Imperium is forged by a dangerous deceit, and erodes us all by demanding we sacrifice truth on the altar of necessity. This is an empire, propagated by sin, that deserves to die. And here, on Isstvan V, we begin the purge. From these ashes shall rise the new kingdom of mankind: an Imperium of justice, faith and enlightenment. An Imperium heralded, commanded and protected by the avatars of the gods themselves. An empire strong enough to stand through a future of blood and fire.'

The change in the room was subtle, but impossible for Astartes senses to miss. Every warrior stood taller, straighter, their hands resting upon the hilts and handles of sheathed weapons.

'The Emperor believes us loyal. Our four Legions were ordered here on that misguided conviction alone. But our coalition here

and now is the fruit of decades' worth of planning. It was ordained, and brought about according to ancient prophecy. No more hiding in the shadows. No more manipulating fleet movements and falsifying expeditionary data. From this day forward, the Alpha Legion, the Word Bearers, the Iron Warriors and the Night Lords stand together – bloodied but unbowed beneath the flag of Warmaster Horus, the second Emperor. The *true* Emperor.'

The Astartes stared, none of them moving a muscle. The primarch could have been addressing an army of statues.

'I see your eyes,' Lorgar's smile took in the room, 'even behind your helms. I see the hesitation, the unease, the mistrust of the very brothers by your side. We are not friends, are we? We have never been allies. Our Legions are kin by bloodline, yet not brought together in proven, chosen brotherhood. But remember this, as you look upon the shades of armour so different to your own. You are united by righteousness. You are unified in revenge. Every weapon in this room is wielded for the same cause. And that, my sons, brothers and cousins… That is all the strength we need. After today, we will be brothers. The forge of war will see to that.'

Silence reigned in the wake of Lorgar's words. The primarch turned back to the hololithic table, already entering the codes necessary to activate the image generator, when several muted clanks sounded behind him.

Lorgar looked over his shoulder, seeking the sounds' sources. Several Word Bearer captains were shaking hands with their counterparts in the other Legions, with more joining in every moment. They gripped wrist-to-wrist, a traditional warrior gesture to seal a pact.

Argel Tal offered his hand to Sevatar. The Night Lord gripped the Word Bearer's wrist as their emotionless faceplates met each other's eyes.

'Death to the False Emperor,' said Sevatar, becoming the first living soul to utter the words that would echo through the millennia.

The curse was taken up by other voices, and soon it was being cried in full-throated roars.

Death to the False Emperor. Death to the False Emperor. Death. Death. Death.

At the heart of the cheering, the four primarchs smiled. Each curl to their lips was variously cold, ugly, mocking or indulgent, but it was as close as they'd come to showing any emotion so far.

Lorgar keyed in the last command code. The hololithic table rumbled into life, its internal generators cycling up to project a flickering image of the surface tundra. A grainy view, flawed by patches of static distortion, hovered in the air above the table. Helms of dark iron, midnight, sea-green, crimson and grey lifted to regard the holo image. It showed a ravine, gouged with tectonic ambivalence, running for several kilometres through the landscape.

'The Urgall Depression,' said one of Lorgar's brothers in a rumbling baritone. 'Our hunting ground.'

Konrad Curze had once, perhaps, been a majestic creature. Everything in his bearing spoke of a regal nature now shattered, all grace and grandeur cast aside to leave a warrior-prince skinned down to a core of lethal, cadaverous nobility. In black armour edged by unpolished bronze, the primarch of the Night Lords gestured to the ravine with a power claw of four curving blades. 'Enhance the image.'

Unseen servitors did exactly that. The three-dimensional hololith blurred momentarily, before refocusing on a more detailed landscape. At one end of the ravine was a fortress of plasteel, ceramite and rockcrete, rendered indistinct by the haze of void shields protecting it from orbital bombardment. A massive panorama of bulwarks, barricades, trenches and earthworks stood implacable guard around it. Every warrior present could see it for what it was: a defensive masterpiece, constructed to repel tens of thousands of enemy troops.

At the other end of the canyon, a literal fleet of gunships and drop-pods lay in wait, but it was what turned the canyon's centre dark that drew all eyes in the chamber.

Two armies were locked in pitched conflict, two greyish masses of grinding battle lines, reduced to an amalgamated horde.

'Enhance central sector,' ordered Primarch Curze.

The image blurred and refocused again, showing a flawed image, disturbed by interference, of…

'Civil war,' Konrad Curze smiled, all teeth and bright eyes. 'The two sides are matched, with our brothers in the Death Guard, World Eaters, Sons of Horus and Emperor's Children holding superior ground, and the Iron Hands, Salamanders and Raven Guard maintaining numerical superiority.'

Argel Tal growled as he breathed, feeling his lips moistened by bile. Nearby heads turned to him, but he ignored their watchful eyes.

'Brother?' Erebus voxed from his place at the primarch's side.

'I thirst,' Argel Tal smiled as he spoke into the private channel.

'You… thirst?'

'I have tasted Astartes blood, Erebus. It is rich enough to never fade from memory, and its genetic holiness stings the tongue. I will taste it again, on Isstvan V.'

The Chaplain didn't reply, but Argel Tal saw Erebus turn to Kor Phaeron, and knew all too well that they were conversing over a secure channel. The thought made him smirk. Silly little creatures. So precious in their meagre ambitions. So feverishly hungry for temporal power. He felt a moment's pity for the primarch, to have spent the last four decades guided by their insipid scheming.

That thought cooled his condescending wrath, though. What *had* they done in all this time? Kor Phaeron's remark about Argel Tal nursemaiding the Custodes away from the 'true Legion' had bitten deeper than he wished to confess.

The growl grew faint in his throat, taking on a bestial whine.

'Be silent,' grunted Sevatar.

Argel Tal tensed, holding his breath, suppressing the rush of anger he felt at being spoken to in such a way. Whatever was bonded to him truly loathed being pushed into situations of submission.

Raum.

What?

I am Raum.

Argel Tal felt his heart beat in time to the whispered syllables. The bile at his lips bubbled as it boiled, and his hands ached to the bone with merciless ferocity.

You are the second soul my father saw so long ago.

Yes.

You twist my thoughts. I am forever on the edge of rage, or speaking bladed words to my brothers.

I bring out only what is already present within you.

I will not let you claim me.

I will not try. We are one. I have slept long enough to drip into every cell within your body. It is your flesh, and it is my flesh. It will change soon. We are Argel Tal, and we are Raum.

Your voice is the same as mine.

It is how my soul speaks to yours, and how our shared flesh translates it into mortal meaning. I have no voice, except for the roars we will shout when we shed blood.

Argel Tal felt burning wetness around his gauntleted fingers. *I am in pain. I cannot move my hands.*

Symbiosis. Union. Balance. There will be times when you rise to the fore. There will be times when I am in ascendance.

Then what is this pain?

It is all a prelude for the changes to come.

The gods have already sent their call. The ordained time has come… I am faster, stronger, more vital than before. And I cannot remove my armour, nor take off my helm.

Yes. This is our new skin.

What more changes can there be?

Raum laughed, whisper-faint and teasingly distant. *You will hear the gods many times in your life. The ordained time has not truly come. You heard the call to begin the Long War, but the gods have not screamed yet. This is the prelude.*

But I heard them. We heard them.

You will know the scream when you truly hear it. This, I promise.

'…the Gal Vorbak will stand with the Iron Warriors, forming the anvil,' concluded Lorgar.

Argel Tal refocused on his surroundings. The pain in his hands faded once more. Not knowing what he should say, he nodded his head in the primarch's direction, agreeing with Lorgar's words without knowing what they were. The primarch offered a kindly smile, seeming to sense his son's distraction.

Lord Curze turned his sleepless eyes upon his own Astartes. 'Then we stand ready. My First Company will also join the Iron Warriors for the initial strike.'

'Dath sethicara tash dasovallian,' the Nostraman language hissed off his tongue. 'Solruthis veh za jass.'

The Night Lord captains banged dark gauntlets against their chestplates. 'In midnight clad,' they chorused.

'Iron within,' Perturabo spoke gruffly, and hefted his massive warhammer over his shoulder. 'Iron without.' In response, his men thudded the hafts of their axes and hammers on the decking.

The warriors of the Alpha Legion, and their primarch himself, remained silent.

It fell to Lorgar, as Argel Tal had known it would, to finish the gathering.

'The forces on the surface have been embattled for almost three hours with no clear victor emerging. Even now, the loyalists wait for us to make planetfall, believing we will reinforce their final advance. We all know our parts to play in this performance. We are all aware of the blood we must shed to spare our species from destruction, and install Horus as the Master of Mankind.

'Brothers,' the primarch bowed his head in reverence. 'Today we take the first step towards forging a greater kingdom. May the gods go with you.'

As Argel Tal made to move from the chamber, he saw his former mentor beckon him closer. Erebus was handsome only in the way a weapon could be called such: a cold blade, dangerous no matter who holds it, reflecting the light while producing none of its own. The Gal Vorbak leader stalked closer, ululating a quiet

growl in his throat, nursing it there and enjoying the feel of his rage.

Erebus wished to speak with him, and Kor Phaeron would almost certainly remain. That in itself was cause for disquiet. What ambitions had they fed to the primarch in four long decades? What had they seen, and what had they learned?

His growl grew louder.

Hate him, but do not strike him. He is chosen. Just like you.

Will I always hear your voice?

No. Our end is fated. We will be destroyed in the shadow of great wings. Then you will hear my voice no more.

Argel Tal felt his blood run cold, and knew that this feeling, at least, was not part of the promised changes to his body.

'Erebus,' he greeted the First Chaplain. 'I am in no mind to argue.'

'Nor I,' the older warrior said. 'Much has happened since we last spoke. We have both seen many things, and made difficult choices to bring us to this moment in time.' Erebus met Argel Tal's eye lenses with his own stony, solemn gaze. It was hard not to admire the Chaplain's composure at all times, and his great patience.

It was also hard to forget his great disappointment, once it was earned.

'I have heard of all you witnessed, and went through,' Erebus continued. 'Xaphen has kept me appraised.'

'Do you have a point?' Argel Tal murmured, and even to his own ears his words sounded puerile.

'I am proud of you.' Erebus briefly rested his hand on Argel Tal's shoulder. 'I simply wished to say that.'

Without another word, Erebus moved away, following the primarch. Kor Phaeron gave a wet, burbling chuckle, and stalked off in slower pursuit, Terminator joints grinding.

TWENTY-FIVE

Second Wave
Changes
Betrayal

IT WAS THE battle to begin the war.

The Urgall Depression was churned to ruination beneath the boots and tank treads of countless thousands of Astartes warriors and their Legion's armour divisions. The loyal primarchs could be found where the fighting was thickest: Corax of the Raven Guard, borne aloft on black wings bound to a fire-breathing flight pack; Lord Ferrus of the Iron Hands at the heart of the battlefield, his silver hands crushing any traitors that came within reach, while he pursued and dragged back those who sought to withdraw; and lastly, Vulkan of the Salamanders, armoured in overlapping artificer plating, thunder clapping from his warhammer as it pounded into yielding armour, shattering it like porcelain.

The traitorous primarchs slew in mirror image to their brothers: Angron of the World Eaters hewing with wild abandon as he raked his chainblades left and right, barely cognizant of who fell before him; Fulgrim of the lamentably-named Emperor's Children, laughing as he deflected the clumsy sweeps of Iron Hands warriors, never stopping in his graceful movements for even a moment; Mortarion of the Death Guard, in disgusting echo of ancient Terran myth, harvesting life with each reaving sweep of his scythe.

And Horus, Warmaster of the Imperium, the brightest star and greatest of the Emperor's sons. He stood watching the destruc-

tion while his Legions took to the field, their liege lord content in his fortress rising from the far edge of the ravine. Shielded and unseen by his brothers still waging war in the Emperor's name, Horus's lips were never still – he spoke continuous orders to his aides, who transmitted them across to the embattled warriors. His eyes remained narrowed as he watched the carnage playing out on the stage below, orchestrated and guided by his own will.

At last, above this maelstrom of grinding ceramite, booming tank cannons and chattering bolters – the gunships, drop-pods and assault landers of the second wave burned through the atmosphere on screaming thrusters. The sky fell dark with the weak sun eclipsed by ten thousand avian shadows, and the cheering roar sent up by the loyalists was loud enough to shake the air itself.

The traitors, the bloodied and battered Legions loyal to Horus, fell into a fighting withdrawal without hesitation.

ARGEL TAL WATCHED all of this from the cockpit of *Rising Sun* as the Thunderhawk swooped low, engines howling as they carried it over the warring armies. A host of Word Bearer's landing craft, the colour of their hulls matching the bleak weather of this cold world, headed for the ravine's edges.

'This is far enough. Set down,' he ordered Malnor, who was piloting.

'By your word.'

The two crimson gunships among the leaders of the grey pack began their downward drift. The Word Bearers chosen landing site was close to the spread of terrain used by the Raven Guard in the initial assault, and the flock of regal, granite-grey aircraft touched down alongside their charcoal-black twins.

Affirmation pulses chimed across the beleaguered vox-network as the four Legions' landers hit their marks. The tide was turned at the eleventh hour. Horus and his rebels broke into full retreat, fleeing back to their fortress.

Argel Tal walked down the gang ramp and into his first filtered breath of Isstvan V's air. It was cold, cold and coppery, with the

rich, earthy smell of churned mud and the ever-present smog of thruster exhaust. A quick scan through his eye lenses showed the panoramic view of the unfolding battle, where the Night Lords corvidish gunships were coming down on one flank, and the Alpha Legion's war machines on the other. The main Word Bearer force bolstered both of their brother Legions on the Depression's sides, and for a brief, uplifting moment, Argel Tal saw the flash of grey, ivory and gold that marked out Lorgar among the exalted First Company.

Then the primarch was gone, stolen by distance, smoke and the press of too many gunships between here and there.

The Iron Warriors had claimed the highest ground, taking the loyalist landing site with all the appearance of reinforcing it through the erection of prefabricated plasteel bunkers. Bulk landers dropped the battlefield architecture: dense metal frames fell from the cargo claws of carrier ships at low altitude, and as the platforms crashed and embedded themselves in the ground, the craftsmen-warriors of the IV Legion worked, affixed, bolted and constructed them into hastily-rising firebases. Turrets rose from their protective housing in the hundreds, while hordes of lobotomised servitors trundled from the holds of Iron Warriors troopships, single-minded in their intent to link with the weapons systems' interfaces.

All the while, Perturabo, Primarch of the IV Legion, watched with passionless pride. He wore layered ceramite that would have looked at home as a tank's armour plating, and clicking, crunching servos in his joints announced even the smallest shift in his stature.

Occasionally, he would spare a moment's glance for the representatives from the other Legions among his number: nodding acknowledgement to the Word Bearers and Night Lords captains sharing his defensive bastions. The nod spoke volumes when coupled with the primarch's bitter eyes: without even the pretence of respect, he acknowledged their presence and warned them to be about their business. Let them remain here as their primarchs had ordered, so long as they did not interfere. The

Iron Warriors did not need them getting in the way. All the while, the sounds of warfare's industry rattled and ground on, and the firebase structures lifted higher, their battlements forming and defensive cannons whirring as they took aim down at the central plain.

Argel Tal and Xaphen led the Gal Vorbak away from their Thunderhawks, through the statuary of landed gunships, and through to the barricades being raised by the metallic forms of the Iron Warriors. The ground trembled gently with the tread of Astartes boots as the Word Bearers seconded to Argel Tal's command closed ranks and followed. Thousands of warriors awaited his signal, their companies and Chapters marked by banners raised high.

Down the line, past the mounting masses of Iron Warriors battle tanks and assembling Astartes, Argel Tal could make out the cloaked form of First Captain Sevatar and his First Company elite, the Atramentar. Bronze chains wrapped their armour, leashing weapons to fists, as the Night Lords made ready for the coming signal.

'We are to be the anvil,' Xaphen voxed to the gathered Word Bearers as they waited by the barricades. 'We are the anvil, while our brothers form the hammer yet to fall. The enemy will stagger back to us, exhausted, clutching empty bolters and broken blades, believing our presence to be a reprieve. The Iron Hands have damned themselves by remaining in the field, but you see the survivors of two Legions coming to us even now. The Salamanders. The Raven Guard. We must hold them long enough for our brothers to annihilate them from the flanks and the rear.'

Argel Tal had tuned out already. He watched the battle breaking apart, seeing the defiant Iron Hands contingent ringing their primarch at the heart of the battlefield. The righteous indignation that kept them there would see them slain before any others.

The forest-green of Salamander ceramite formed a withdrawing mass scrambling its way back uphill to the Iron Warrior barricades over to the east, while the battered black armour of the Raven Guard warriors came towards the unified Night Lords and

Word Bearers force. The loyalists' shattered unit cohesion was already beginning to reform, reshaping around bannered sergeants as they marched up the incline.

Argel Tal swallowed a mouthful of something that tasted like poisoned blood. He couldn't keep himself from salivating.

Raum, he said silently, but there was no answer. In a bizarre moment of clarity, he realised he could feel the wind against his skin. Not the focused feeling of pressure from a puncture in his warplate, but all over – a faint breath of wind against his flesh, as if his wargear had grown dull nerves capable of recognising external sensation. His hands began to ache again, and this time the pain brought something new: the sense of swelling, stretching, the torture of his own body-meat rendered as malleable as clay, with the brittle creaking of bone still inside.

Targeting circles that he hadn't activated started to spin before his eyes, flickering across the blue lenses in search of prey.

Beneath them the Raven Guard in their thousands marched up the rise of land. Not a single one had escaped with his armour unscarred from the battle below. Despite their distance, Argel Tal's vision was keen enough to make out how individual warriors marched with their bolters slung, out of ammunition, and oaths of moment reduced to burned, flapping parchment rags in the wind.

'Sixty seconds,' he growled into the vox.

'By your word,' chorused three thousand warriors in the ranks alongside him.

DAGOTAL SAT IN his saddle, looking over the barricades. The repulsor drive built into his jetbike's chassis hummed in sympathy with his movements, whining louder as the rider leaned forward to watch the withdrawing Raven Guard draw nearer.

His task was to skirt the battle's edges, cutting down any stragglers that sought to escape from the main melee. Although only five of his outriders had survived the transition into the Gal Vorbak so many years before, they sat at his side now, gunning their engines in readiness for what they were committed to do.

He blinked burning sweat from his eyes, breathing in laboured rasps, trying to ignore the voice howling in his mind. The pain in his throat had been building in intensity for hours to the point where swallowing caused excruciating pain. Now, even breathing was a trial. Venom dripped down his chin, bubbling hot, from his overworking saliva glands. The acidic poison dripped over his lower teeth every few seconds, and he could no longer bear to swallow and neutralise it.

'Thirty seconds,' came Argel Tal's order.

Dagotal murmured meaningless syllables with a wet voice, as acid hissed from his helm's mouth grille.

TORGAL THUMBED A gear-rune on his chainaxe's control, shifting settings from soft tissue to armour plating. A thicker second layer of jagged teeth slid forward alongside the first. In truth, a chainbladed weapon would always struggle to do more than strip the paint from layered ceramite, but it would chew through fibre-bundle armour joints or exposed power cables with ease.

He had been weeping blood, without feeling sorrow or any emotion at all, for an hour. Had he been able to remove his helm, Torgal was certain the scarlet tracks would be stained across his cheeks by now, darkening the skin with a tattoo's permanence. Each time he blinked, his tear ducts flushed more of the watery blood-fluid down his face. When his tongue moved in his mouth, it slid along a maw of jagged teeth that cut his tongue open, and he tasted coppery pain for the few seconds it took the little slice wounds to seal.

Blood, thick and dark, was leaking from the knuckle-joints of his gauntlets, cementing his fingers to the haft of his axe. He couldn't open his hand. He couldn't release the weapon, no matter how he tried.

'Twenty seconds,' said Argel Tal.

Torgal closed his eyes to blink them clear, but they wouldn't open again.

MALNOR'S BREATH SAWED in an out of his vocaliser grille. A chorus of voices assailed him, and for the briefest moment, he believed he was listening to the sounds of everyone he had ever met in his life. There was a tremor in his bones that he couldn't suppress.

'Ten seconds,' came Argel Tal's voice. 'Stand ready.'

Malnor's twitched head turned to the advancing ranks of the Raven Guard. Distance markers flashed across his retinal display, flickering as it recognised individual squad sigils on their shoulder guards.

Malnor grinned, and clutched his bolter tighter.

'BROTHERS,' THE VOICE crackled. 'This is Captain Torisian, 29th Company, Raven Guard.'

At the vanguard of the marching Astartes, a cloaked captain raised his hand in greeting. A spent bolter was mag-locked to his thigh, and a gladius glinted in his left hand. The captain's cloak, once a regal blue, was a ragged ruin. Argel Tal raised his own hand in response, and replied over the vox.

'This is Argel Tal, Lord of the Gal Vorbak, Word Bearers Legion. How goes the battle, brother?'

The Raven Guard leader laughed as he came closer. 'The traitorous dogs already flee the field, but they fight like bastards, each and every one. In Terra's name, it is a blessing to see you. Our primarch has ordered us back for resupply – but Lord Corax is an unselfish man. He would not wish us to steal all the glory on this day of days.'

Argel Tal could hear the smile in the other warrior's voice as he continued. 'Good hunting down there, all of you. Glory to the Word Bearers. Glory to the Emperor!'

The commander of the Gal Vorbak didn't reply. The advancing Raven Guard were almost at the barricades. He felt his muscles bunching and twitching with sick need.

'Brother?' asked Torisian. The captain's armour was an older Mark III Iron-class suit, blocky and heavy, almost primitive

compared to the Maximus-class armour worn by the XVII Legion. 'What are your plans for assault?'

Argel Tal took a breath, and prepared to speak damnation.

Without knowing why, he couldn't keep from thinking of Lorgar's words to him, spoken so long ago. *'You are Argel Tal. You were born on Colchis, in the village of Singh-Rukh, to a carpenter and a seamstress. Your name means 'the last angel' in the dialect of the southern steppes tribes.'*

He thought, briefly, of his parents – two hundred years dead now. He had never visited their graves. He wasn't even sure where they might be.

His father had been a quiet man with kind eyes, who had round shoulders from a lifetime of devotion to his craft. His mother was a mouse of a woman, with dark eyes and black hair in the ringlets preferred by the southern tribes. She had smiled a great deal. It was his abiding memory of her.

How far he'd come, in distance and time, from their riverside hut of packed mud and straw. He could almost feel the river water on his hands now, cooling to the touch even as it sparkled in the oppressive Colchisian sun.

He had four older sisters, each as distant and dead as his parents. They had wept when the Legion came for him, though at the time he couldn't understand why. All he could see was the adventure, the joy, in being chosen by the holy warriors. The youngest – Lakisha, only a year older than he was – had given him a necklace of desert-dog teeth that she'd made herself. He felt it now, tied around his wrist, bound there each dawn upon rising and completing his meditations. The original string had long since rotted away, but he threaded the jackal teeth onto a new cord with the passing of every few years.

His oldest sister, Dumara, had spent every day telling him that he was good for nothing but getting underfoot. But she had no unkind words that day, and instead brought him a blanket of goat's wool to take with him.

'He will not require that,' the massive grey warrior had declared in a machine-voice.

Dumara flinched back, clutching the blanket to her chest. Instead of offering it to the boy, she kissed his cheek instead. She was crying, too. He remembered how her tears made his face wet, and he hoped the warrior didn't think it was he who'd been crying. He had to look brave, else the warrior might not choose him after all.

'What is the boy's name?' the warrior demanded.

His mother had surprised him with a question of her own. 'What is your name, warrior?'

'Erebus. My name is Erebus.'

'Thank you, Lord Erebus, this is my son, Argel Tal.'

Argel Tal. The Last Angel. He'd been born as a sickly little thing, during a year of blight and drought, and was given a name to mark him as the last child his mother would ever bring into their dry, thirsty world.

'Forgive me,' he whispered now. He hadn't meant to speak the words aloud, but didn't regret doing so.

'Brother?' Torisian's voice crackled. 'Repeat, please.'

Argel Tal's grey eyes hardened to flint. 'All Word Bearers,' he said. 'Open fire.'

TWENTY-SIX

Dropsite Massacre
Hull Breach
In the Shadow of Great Wings

TORISIAN SHOVED THE body of his sergeant aside and scrambled forward. His ammunition counter flashed up the moment he touched a hand to his bolter, and it told a stark tale indeed. Among the clattering, crashing carnage, he drew his combat blade and charged.

'Victory or death!' he cried the call of his Legion. 'We are betrayed! *Attack!*'

Bolt shells hammered into his chest and pauldrons as he ran, throwing him off-balance and breaking his armour apart. He sustained damage faster than his retinal display could track it. Torisian staggered, feeling fluid in his throat. A dense wetness was drowning him behind his ribcage.

The flash of blue hit him from nowhere, brighter than staring into the sun, tipping him back down to the ground. There he died alongside so many of his brothers, bisected by lascannon fire and dead from his wounds before he could drown in the blood filling his lungs.

The Raven Guard front ranks went down as if scythed, harvested in a spilling line of detonating bolter shells, shattered armour and puffs of bloody mist.

Black-armoured Astartes tumbled to their hands and knees, only to be cut down by the sustained volley, finishing those who fell beneath the initial storm of head- and chest-shots. Seconds after the first chatter of bolters, beams of achingly bright laser

slashed from behind the Word Bearers as the cannon mounts of Land Raiders, Predators and defensive bastion turrets gouged through the Raven Guard and the ground they stood upon.

Argel Tal saw precious little of the bigger picture. Beams of ice-blue, as thick as his arm, slashed and burst overhead as they carved furrows in the soil and sliced cleanly through bodies. At his side, the Gal Vorbak stood in silence, clutching their axes and blades. The Iron Warriors and Word Bearers around them were variously reloading, opening fire again, hurling grenades, and preparing to fall back.

In the eye of this storm, Argel Tal looked on with hooded eyes. The vox-link to Torisian remained open long enough for him to hear the warrior die, wordless gurgles transmitting over the channel as the captain crashed to the ground.

KOR PHAERON LICKED his yellow teeth.

The wind howled around them, funnelled through the Urgall Depression in a noisy roar that challenged the battlefield's thunder for supremacy. It was an unclean wind, carrying the bowel-smoke of tank engines in its breeze.

'I cannot see,' he confessed. 'It is too far.'

The Word Bearers Legion had taken up landing positions on the west of the field, ready to sweep down and engage the Raven Guard from the flank. Three figures stood atop the roof of an ornate command tank, the Land Raider's bronze and grey armour decked out with flapping banners and etched with fingernail-fine scripture over every visible surface.

Kor Phaeron, Master of the Faith, watched the distant dropsite through a desperate squint. He was unhelmed, and his massive Terminator warplate gave him the appearance of a hunched, armour-plated giant.

Erebus stood at his side, watching without effort, his Astartes vision keen enough to offer clarity.

'We are winning,' he said. 'Nothing else matters.' Only a flicker of emotion in his eyes betrayed his humour. Erebus was a dry soul, right to his core. 'But already, the Raven Guard attacks the

barricades. Far to the other side, the Salamanders fall to the guns of the other Legions. In the centre of it all, the few remaining Iron Hands encircle their doomed lord.'

Lorgar towered above both of them, but had no attention to spare for the treacherous opening salvoes against the warriors of the Raven Guard and Salamanders Legions. He stared into the battlefield's heart, his eyes wide even in the wind, his lips gently parted as he watched his brothers killing each other.

Fulgrim and Ferrus, the fading sunlight flaring from the edges of their swinging weapons. The wind stole the clash and clang of their parries, but even in silence the duel was beyond captivating. No senses but a primarch's could have followed such instant, liquid movements. The perfection of it all almost brought a smile to Lorgar's lips.

Lorgar knew them both, though never as well as he'd wanted to. His approaches to Fulgrim had always been rebuffed with diplomatic grace, but his brother's ire was clear: Lorgar, among all of the Emperor's sons, was the failure that just wouldn't remain silent. Even in the fifty years since his humiliation in Monarchia, as the Word Bearers had conquered more than any other Legion, desperate to match the tallies of the Sons of Horus and the Ultramarines. Fulgrim still wished nothing to do with him. The Lord of the Emperor's Children – and oh, how proud he was that his sons alone among the Astartes could wear the Emperor's aquila on their armour – had never voiced his distaste in express terms, but Fulgrim's feelings were transparent enough. He was a being that valued nothing but perfection, and Lorgar was irrevocably stained by his flaws.

Ferrus, Lord of the Iron Hands, was an open book where Fulgrim was a closed one. Lorgar's passion was ever on the surface, as was the passion of his Legion on the battlefield. Ferrus contained his wrath beneath a dignified facade but never buried it, and asked the same of his warriors. While Ferrus treasured those times on Terra he had spent working at the forge, shaping metal into weapons worthy of gifting to his demigod brothers, Lorgar had sequestered himself in the palace itself, debating philosophy,

ancient history and human nature with Magnus and the Emperor's more cerebral courtiers, advisers and viziers.

The closest they'd come to an accord was still a memory barely worthy of any family. Lorgar had come to find Ferrus in his forge, working at the construction of something molten, dangerous and undoubtedly destined to be a weapon of war. It seemed all the Iron Hands primarch was capable of.

Knowing the spiteful thought was petty, Lorgar had sought to temper it. 'One wonders if you are capable of making anything that creates, rather than destroys.' He tried to smile, hoping it would rob the accusation of any venom as he stood uncomfortably in the heat blaring from the open furnace.

Ferrus had cast a glance over his dark-skinned shoulder and watched his fey brother for a moment, not returning the smile. 'One wonders if you are capable of creating anything worthwhile at all.'

Lorgar's golden features had tightened, the smile now etched on rather than worn with any sincerity. 'You summoned me?'

'That I did.' Ferrus stepped away from the anvil. His bare chest was flecked with miniscule marks of burn tissue, hundreds of them pockmarking his dark skin from stray sparks and spatters of molten metal. A lifetime of forge-work, worn like a coat of medals that scarred the flesh. 'I made something for you,' he said, his voice as low and rumbling as ever.

'What? Why?'

'I won't call it a rescue,' said Ferrus, 'for my warriors wouldn't stand for that. But I owe you thanks for the "reinforcement" at Galadon Secondus.'

'You owe me nothing, brother. I live to serve.'

Ferrus grunted, as if doubting even that. 'Be that as it may, here is a token of my appreciation.'

Ferrus's Legion was named for the primarch himself. His arms were metallic, but not robotic, as if formed from some alien compound of organic silver. Lorgar had never asked about his brother's unique biology, knowing that Ferrus would never explain it to him.

As he reached a nearby table, he lifted a long weapon with a sure grip. Without a word, he tossed it to Lorgar. The Word Bearer caught it neatly with one hand, though it was heavier than he'd expected and he winced under its sudden weight.

'It's called Illuminarum,' Ferrus was already working back at his anvil. 'Try not to break it.'

'I… I do not know what to say.'

'Say nothing.' Already, the falling ring of hammer-hand upon yielding steel.*Clang, clang, clang.* 'Say nothing, and leave me be. That will spare us any halting attempts at conversation when we agree on nothing, and have nothing but awkwardness to share.'

'As you wish.' Lorgar had forced a smile to his brother's back, and left in silence. Such was the extent of his closeness to Fulgrim and Ferrus.

LORGAR STARED AT the two of them now, awe paling his features as their weapons cracked off each other, shedding sprays of power-field lightning.

'What have we done?' he whispered. 'These are my brothers.'

Kor Phaeron grunted in wordless disapproval. 'Boy, *order the attack.* We must support Argel Tal and the Iron Warriors.'

'But what are we doing? Why have we done it this way?'

Erebus didn't scowl, he was far too composed for that, but Kor Phaeron wore his human emotion with greater ease. He fairly snarled the words, leeching them of kindness.

'We are bringing enlightenment to the galaxy, Lorgar. This is what you were born for.'

Erebus turned to regard his primarch. 'Is it not a grand sensation, sire? To be the architect of all this? To see your designs reach fruition?'

Lorgar would not, could not, look away from his duelling kin. 'This was not my design, and you know it as well as I. Let us not pretend I have any skill at orchestrating bloodshed and betrayal on this scale.'

Kor Phaeron's lips twisted as close as they ever came to a smile. 'You give me far too much credit.'

'It is well-earned.' The primarch's gauntleted fist was tight around Illuminarum's haft, and minute tremors narrowed his eyes with each blow that rained upon Ferrus's black armour. 'Ferrus is tiring. Fulgrim is going kill him.'

With a grinding purr of servos, Kor Phaeron came forward to rest a clawed hand on his foster son's arm. 'Do not let it grieve you. What must be, must be.'

Lorgar didn't shake the hand off, which both Erebus and Kor Phaeron counted as enough of a triumph. Lorgar's feyness had worn on them both, and it took great patience and subtlety to incite him to violence. This battle had been years in the planning, and they would not allow him to foul it now with misplaced compassion. Emboldened, Kor Phaeron continued. 'The truth is ugly, boy, but it is all we have.'

'Boy.' Mirth had no place in Lorgar's smile. 'I am over two centuries old, and I am dragging my father's empire to its knees. Yet you still call me *boy.* Sometimes I find that a comfort. Other times, a weight around my shoulders.'

'You are my son, Lorgar. Not the Emperor's. And you are bringing hope to mankind.'

'Enough,' said the primarch, and now he did shake his foster father's hand loose. 'Come. Let us get this day done with.' Lorgar raised his crozius maul to the sky.

It was all the signal they needed. Thousands of Word Bearers roared their approval behind him, as their liege lord led them to war.

THE WAR ON the surface was of no concern to him anymore.

Staying alive was, but then, that was always a concern. He was forever aware of that fact, which was why he was so good at it. Still, he had to admit it had become a more pressing matter, and a more difficult aim to reach.

Ishaq had never been in a void battle before, and it wasn't something he hoped to get into again. The ship shook as if in a storm's grip, shuddering with a belligerent aggression that defied all expectation. Every two dozen steps he took found him

thrown to the floor with knee-aching violence, and resulted in hisses of pain along with the creation of new swear words – the latter usually by melding three existing curses together in a stream of invective. When Ishaq Kadeen swore, he swore with feeling, even if not with sense.

Half of the problem was that he was lost, and the other half of the problem was that he was lost on what was jokingly-referred to as the monastic deck, where the Word Bearers and their Legion serfs went about the business of being heroes (and the slaves of heroes). Sneaking onto the deck had seemed a good idea at the time; he'd hoped for some panoramic views of Astartes training chambers, or discarded suits of armour awaiting repair, or immense weapon racks to show the scale of war waged by the Emperor's Legions. All of these would have made for fine, private and personal images very rarely seen from the Great Crusade, and would have bolstered his portfolio immeasurably. Stealing the grey, hooded Legion robe had been no trouble at all. Even slaves with vows of silence had to do their laundry.

It had started well. Then the battle had started, and he'd got lost.

Luckily, no Word Bearers were on board, all of them committed to the world below. The Legion serfs he did see were hurrying along about their business, but even they were hardly a sizable population. Evidently they had other duties to perform when their masters went to war. What they might be, Ishaq had no idea.

'Shields down,' shouted a voice over the shipwide vox, accompanied by some truly horrendous shaking. 'Shields down, shields down.'

Well, that wasn't good.

He stumbled around a corner as the lights flickered above. Another long corridor awaited him, with various junctions leading off deeper into this never-ending maze. At the far end, he could see another bulkhead of dense, multi-layered metal. He'd come across several of these so far, and was almost certain that they led to the most interesting parts of the deck. Ishaq wasn't about

to attempt to gain entrance though – a single failed retinal scan would mark his location to the Army units on board, and he could look forward to a quick execution. Oh, yes. He remembered the penalties for coming here all too well.

The Euchar were proving to be a problem too. Squads of them patrolled the halls with their lasguns held diligently to their chests, and though he was immune to their gaze with his robe's hood covering most of his face, they made it difficult to take any picts, even if he had actually come across anything worthwhile.

Ishaq was finally considering a tactical retreat when the ship shook with enough violence to send him sprawling off-balance, head banging off the steel wall. It hurt enough to stun him, and it stunned him enough that he didn't even think of swearing.

That lapse was rectified several seconds later, when an automated voice declared a list of breached decks over the vox. The list came to a climax with the words: 'Deck Sixteen, void breach. Bulkheads sealing. Deck Sixteen, void breach. Bulkheads sealing.'

In a moment of almost poetic disgust, Ishaq looked up to see the great, red 'XVI' emblazoned on the wall where he'd hit his head. It was even decorated with spots of his blood.

'You're kidding me,' he said out loud.

'Deck Sixteen, void breach,' the crackling voice monotoned again. 'Bulkheads sealing.'

'I heard you the first time.'

The ship rattled again, with the definite booming of explosions only a few corners away. Smoke billowed from the far end of the corridor.

Ishaq's world dimmed into the deep, unwanted red spectrum of emergency lighting. At best, it would ruin any picts he took. At worst, and much more likely, he was about to die.

ARGEL TAL DREW back his claws. The blood lining them sank into the curling metal, drank as thirstily as desert soil drinks rainwater. He released a great howl to the sky as he waded forward, kicking aside wounded Astartes and carving out at the massed

Raven Guard in range. Their blades broke against his armour, each strike hitting with a curiously muted sensation – he could feel the slices as if they were chopping into the skin of his armour, but they never bled, never caused any pain.

blade left danger kill

The warnings manifested with tickling pressure behind his forehead, somewhere between a voice, a premonition, and a tide of instinct. He wasn't sure if Raum was warning him, or he was warning Raum – both voices were the same, and his movements were only half his own. He would swipe with a claw, but the blow would accelerate and hit harder than he could ever manage himself. He would block a sword blow, but would find his talons around the enemy's throat before he had time to think.

He wrenched his head to the left – he smelled the metal tang of the descending blade, he caught the flash of sunlight along its edge without even looking – and Argel Tal span to kill its wielder. The Word Bearer's claws raked across the warrior's torso and the Raven Guard dropped instantly, his armour savaged and pulled from his body. Argel Tal's fingers burned as they absorbed his brother's blood. Under his helm, his grinning mouth was stained red by a bleeding tongue.

In every battle of his life, he'd felt a desperation beneath the ferocity of the moment. A feverish awareness of how to survive always nestled beneath his righteous anger, even in those moments of near-suicidal attack when he'd led dozens of his brothers against hundreds of the enemy. As his claws ravaged the armour and exposed faces of the Raven Guard around him, he cast that awareness aside.

'Traitor!' one of the Raven Guard cried at him. Argel Tal roared in reply, the ceramite of his helm cracking open to reveal a jagged maw, and leapt at the warrior. The Astartes died on the blood-mulched ground, pulled and torn to pieces by Argel Tal's jointed claws.

He was dimly aware of snarling laughter coming over the vox. At one point, in the senseless, timeless melee, Xaphen had shouted to them all.

'The Gal Vorbak are released at last!'

'No,' Argel Tal replied with growling certainty, without knowing how he knew. 'Not yet.'

He tore the helm from a Raven Guard's head and leered into the struggling warrior's face.

'Beast…' the Astartes choked. 'Corruption…'

Argel Tal caught his reflection in the warrior's eyes. His black helm roared back at him, the left eye still ringed by a golden sun, the mouth grille split to reveal monstrous jaws of ceramite and bone, the crystal blue eye lenses leaking trails of blood down his painted faceplate.

Argel Tal sank his claws into the warrior's body, feeling the tingle of leeching blood as his talons scratched at the man's organs and bones. 'I am the truth.'

He *pulled*, and the Raven Guard came apart in his hands, rendered into bloody chunks.

'No peace among the stars,' he said, unsure if both of his voices were speaking or if he merely imagined one of them.

'Only the laughter of thirsting gods.'

The Gal Vorbak howled as one as they cast around for more prey, chasing down the Raven Guard that sought to regroup and oppose the unbelievable treachery facing them. Argel Tal howled loudest of all, but the sound soon died in his throat.

A shadow, the shadow of great wings, eclipsed the sun.

THE GROUND MURMURED with his landing. Claws slashed from their power-fist housings with silver flashes, and shimmering wings of dark metal reached up from his shoulders into the air above. Slowly, so painfully slowly, he raised his head to the traitors. Black eyes stared from a face whiter than Imperial marble, and written across the pale features was the most consummate, complete anger Argel Tal had ever seen. It was an emotion truer and deeper even than the rage that ruined the faces of the daemons within the warp.

And Argel Tal realised it was not anger, nor rage. It went beyond both. This was wrath, in physical form.

The primarch of the Raven Guard turned with an inhuman cry, letting the thrumming wing-blades affixed to his smoking jetpack slice out with their killing edges. Word Bearers tumbled away in droves, shredded into lumps of armoured flesh. The claws followed, rending through any of the grey warriors unlucky enough to be within range of the warlord's landing.

Once he was in motion, Corax never slowed. He was a blur of charcoal armour and black blades, carving, chopping, dismembering without effort, mutilating with the barest movement, butchering with an ease that belied his ferocity.

Lascannon fire rained towards the primarch as the Iron Warriors turned their turrets on the gravest threat in range. The Word Bearers caught in the net of streaming fire were sliced apart as surely as the ones killed by Corax's claws, but the beams themselves flashed aside from the primarch's armour, never striking it straight-on, leaving savage burn scars without once penetrating.

The voices of dying Word Bearers became a conflicting chorus over the vox.

'Help us!' one of the captains screamed to Argel Tal.

The Crimson Lord cast aside the last Raven Guard he'd killed – the warrior's neck had crackled most satisfyingly as he was strangled – and ordered the Gal Vorbak to charge. It left his helm as a split-jawed roar, for even his face was no longer his own.

Even with the cry reduced to wordless malice, the Gal Vorbak understood and obeyed. The first to reach Corax was Ajanis, and the Raven Guard lord butchered the warrior without even turning to face him. A burst of flame from the flight pack seared Ajanis's armour, slowing him long enough for the swinging wings to shear through his torso as Corax turned to face other enemies. The crimson Word Bearers leapt and struck at the primarch, but their assault did little more than their grey brothers' had done.

We die in the shadow of great wings, came the voice from within.

I know.

Argel Tal leapt forward to meet his end at the hands of a demigod.

LORGAR HESITATED, AND in that moment his crozius maul lowered. Blood marred its ornate head – the blood of the Raven Guard: the same blood that ran in his brother's veins ran through his genetic progeny.

Bolter shells cracked against Lorgar's armour, their heat and explosive debris going utterly ignored. Just as the Word Bearers struggled to stand before Corax, so too did the Raven Guard fall back and die in droves to Lorgar's dispassionate, surgical destruction through their ranks.

Lorgar's head snapped back as a bolter shell thudded into his helm, disrupting the retinal electronics and warping the ceramite. He wrenched the mangled metal from his face and killed his attacker with a single swipe of Illuminarum. The blow sent the Raven Guard tumbling away over the heads of his retreating brothers, crashing down among them.

'What is it?' Kor Phaeron stalked to Lorgar's side, his claws as wet as the primarch's crozius. 'Push on! They are breaking before us!'

Lorgar aimed his maul across the battlefield. Corax was wading through the Gal Vorbak, ripping the crimson warriors apart.

'Who cares about the albino's cowardice?' Kor Phaeron was frothing, spit spraying from his lips as he cursed. *'Focus on the fight that matters.'*

Lorgar ignored the bile in his father's words, as well as the infrequent shells crashing against his armour. Given a blessed respite from the primarch's murderous advance, the Raven Guard were falling back from him in a black tide. They left their dead in a carpet at the primarch's feet.

'You do not understand,' Lorgar shouted over the din. 'My brother is not fleeing. He has flown to where the fighting is thickest. He is cleaving a path to his gunships, drawing the worst of our firepower, so his sons might escape.'

Erebus was a grey blur of lethal motion, hammering an unhelmed Raven Guard sergeant to the ground and killing him with a return swing that caved in the warrior's skull.

'Sire…' The First Chaplain's armour was blackened from flamer wash, the joints still smoking. 'Please focus.'

Lorgar clutched his sundered helm in one hand. The vox-link was still open. He could hear the tinny screams of the dying. 'He is killing so many of us.'

The helm fell, gripped no more. He held his bloodied maul in ironclad fists, and clenched his teeth just as tightly. *'No,'* the word was breathed with absolute conviction.

Kor Phaeron's face was a mess of wounds, and even with his augmentations, he was breathing in a hoarse rasp. The battle was costing him dearly. He met Erebus's eyes for a moment – and something akin to disgust passed between them.

'Your deeds are ordained on these killing fields,' Erebus spoke almost as if delivering a sermon. 'You must not face your brothers yet. It is *fate.* We play our destined parts, as the pantheon wills it.'

'Kill. The. Raven. Guard.' Kor Phaeron growled through bleeding lips. 'That is what you are here to do, boy.'

Lorgar stepped forward and cast a sneer that settled over both his mentor and ancient foster father. 'No.'

Kor Phaeron screamed in frustrated anger. Erebus remained composed. 'You have laboured for decades to raise an army of the faithful, sire: a Legion that would die for your cause. Do not deviate from the path now you at last possess what you have dreamed of.' Lorgar turned from them both, first watching the retreating Raven Guard, then seeing Corax slaughtering his way through Word Bearers – some armoured in grey, some in crimson.

'We have found gods to worship,' he said, staring without blinking. 'But we are not enslaved to them. My life is my own.'

'He'll kill you!' Kor Phaeron's sluggish Terminator warplate wouldn't let him run, but there was real fear, real sorrow, beneath the anger and panic. 'Lorgar! *Lorgar! No!'*

Lorgar broke into a sprint, boots pounding over the churned earth and dead bodies of his brother's Legion, and for the first

time in his life, he went to engage in a battle he had no hope of winning.

'My death is my own, as well,' he breathed the words as he ran.

He saw his brother – a man he'd barely spoken to in two centuries of life, a man he barely knew – butchering his sons in a vicious rage. There was no thought of conversion. No hope of bringing Corax into the fold, or enlightening him enough to cease this murderous rampage. Lorgar's own anger rose to the fore, burning away the passionless killing of only moments ago. As the Word Bearers primarch hammered his way through the Raven Guard to reach his brother, he felt power seethe within him, aching to rise out.

Always, he'd bitten back his psychic potential, hiding it and hating it in equal measure. It was unreliable, erratic, unstable and painful. It was never the gift it seemed to be for Magnus, and thus, he had swallowed it back, walling it up behind unyielding resolve.

No more. A scream of release tore itself free, not from his mouth, but his mind. It echoed across the battlefield. It echoed into the void. Energy sparked from his armour, and a sixth sense unrestrained at last, with its purity perhaps coloured by Chaos, exhaled from his core. A sound like the crashing of tides in the Sea of Souls swept through the ravine, and Lorgar felt the heat of his own fury made manifest. He felt his unchained power reaching out, not only to enhance his physical form, but reaching to his sons across the battlefield.

And there he stood at the heart of the killing fields, winged and haloed by amorphous contrails of psychic fire, shouting his brother's name into the storm.

Corax answered with a shriek of his own – the call of the betrayer, the cry of the betrayed – and the raven met the heretic in a clash of crozius and claw.

THIS, CAME THE voice, *is the cry of the gods we have both been waiting for.*

Argel Tal had no hope of replying. The pain knifing through every cell in his body was enough that he sought to slay himself, clawing at his helm and throat, feeling his fingers burning with his own blood as he ripped hunks armour from his flesh, and fistfuls of flesh from his bones.

Do not fight the communion.

Again, he ignored the voice. He wasn't dying, no matter how he tried. A hooked claw tore the skin from his throat, and with it, half of his collarbone. He inflicted similar injuries upon himself with each second, but he wasn't dying. He scrabbled at the armour and bone shielding his two hearts, feverish in his need to wrench both of them from his chest.

Communion… Ascension…

The winged shadow vanished from Argel Tal's vision, and above him the sky was brightened by the last rays of the setting sun.

I am alive, he thought, even as he tore himself apart, even as he ripped a handful of steaming organ meat from his shattered ribcage and burst his first heart in his hand. *I did not die beneath the shadow, and I cannot destroy myself now.*

This pain will bleed you of sanity. Let me ascend!

Despite agony no living being had ever survived, there was still a moment of fierce resistance in the war behind Argel Tal's eyes. He wanted to die, to taste nothingness, not to endure further corruption. The sentience that was Raum found itself shackled deeper within by a soul ruthlessly unwilling to surrender.

I will save us, not harm us. RELEASE ME.

The Word Bearer's concentration went slack, not because he believed the daemon's words, but from reaching the absolute end of his strength.

Argel Tal closed his eyes.

Raum opened them.

A CLOVEN HOOF of bleached bone, wreathed in ceramite that seemed moulded to fit, crushed a gasping Raven Guard warrior into the mud. Great claws with too many joints, resembling the

lashing branches of winter trees, closed and opened, closed and opened, while each of its long fingers ended in black talons. Most of the crimson armour was bulked up and layered by dense bone ridges and knuckly spines. It stood taller than even an Astartes – though not equal to the primarchs battling a short distance away.

Its helm was crowned in pagan majesty with great horns of ivory, and silhouetted against the bright cannon fire it seemed to resemble the Taur of Minos from pre-Imperial Terran mythology. Its legs were jointed backwards and brutally muscled beneath the armour, with powerful black hooves leaving burning imprints in the soil. Its Astartes helm was split along the cheeks and mouth grille to reveal a shark's maw with rows of bladed teeth, glinting with clear acidic saliva.

The daemon drew in a great breath and roared it back out into the retreating ranks of the Raven Guard. That terrible wall of sound hit the Astartes as if an earthquake was laughing at them. Dozens fell to their hands and knees.

Around the warped helm's left eye lens, the golden sun was all that marked the creature as the man it had been.

TWENTY-SEVEN

An Image to Make his Name
Sacrifice
The Burden of Truth

ISHAQ MADE A jump for it, and rolled under the bulkhead before it slammed down. It was less daring than it sounded as the security doors were taking their sweet time to close, but with the sirens wailing and the emergency lighting darkening everything to deep red, he was hardly thinking clearly. He didn't want to get sucked out of a void breach, but nor did he want to be caught up here when the battle was over. He needed to go, go, go.

Checking his picter was still in one piece, he broke into another sprint, desperate to get the hell off this deck. The labyrinthine corridors defied this, hindering him further by the fact most of the wall markings were in Colchisian rather than Imperial Gothic.

Have I been here before? One corridor was much the same as another. In the distance, he could hear bulkheads sealing shut and corridors collapsing as the ship sustained more damage. He'd already made it through several thoroughfares where the walls were reduced to wreckage scattered all over the floor in a twisted mess of grey steel and black iron.

He started running again. Four dead men waited around the next corner – four Euchar soldiers, half-crushed by an exploded, fallen wall.

No. Three dead. 'Help me,' said the fourth.

Ishaq froze while the ship shook around him. If this soldier survived and identified him later, he was a dead man for being on the monastic deck.

'Please,' the trembling man begged.

Ishaq knelt by the soldier and heaved some of the wreckage off his legs. The Euchar screamed, and the imagist squinted through the emergency darkness to see why. Some of the detritus had pierced the soldier's legs and belly, pinning him to the floor. There'd be no helping him, after all. Pulling this out was the work of a skilled surgeon, and even then, it likely wouldn't be enough to save the poor wretch.

'I can't. I'm sorry. I can't.' He rose to his feet. 'I can't do anything.'

'*Shoot me, you stupid bast—*'

'I don't have a—' He saw the soldier's rifle half-buried in the junk, and hauled it free. As he tried to take aim, the shuddering ship almost sent him sprawling.

Click, went the trigger. *Click, click, click.*

'Safety,' the soldier groaned. Blood was pooling beneath him. 'The… switch.'

Ishaq flicked the switch along the gun's side, and pulled the trigger. He'd never fired a lasweapon before. The *crack-flash* left dancing lights before his eyes, and he struggled at first to see the soldier. The man was dead now, his head emptied against the wall behind him. The corridor itself was blocked by debris, and Ishaq dropped the rifle with a clatter, turning to head back the way he'd come.

The bulkhead at the end of the concourse *thunked* shut with a finality Ishaq almost swore was smug, trapping him in a corridor with four dead bodies and a lot of wreckage. One door led out of here, marked by what looked like Colchisian verse on the damaged walls either side.

He pounded his fists against it, getting no answer. The door was warm, charged somehow, as if the room on the other side were a living thing. Ishaq hammered meaningless numbers into the keypad, receiving the same amount of success.

At last, he took up the lasrifle again, closed his eyes, and shot the security panel. The keypad shorted out, flickering with small flames, and the door at the heart of the monastic deck opened with a sweltering whisper of released air. The sigh of pressure was obscene in its biological origins, stinking of unwashed flesh and the faecal reek of prolonged deprivation. Voices drifted out from the room as if carried on the air. They mumbled and muttered, and made no sense.

Ishaq stood, staring inside, unable to form words at what he was seeing.

His picter flashed. This, at last, was the image to make his name.

HIS BROTHER WAS a warrior, a warlord, and from the very first moment their weapons met, Corax was fighting to kill, while Lorgar fought to stay alive. The battle moved too fast for mortal eyes to perceive, with both primarchs pushing themselves beyond anything else they'd endured.

Corax evaded the crozius without even once parrying. He weaved aside, threw himself out of reach, or fired his flight pack with enough force to boost him up and over Lorgar's heavy swings. By contrast, sweat stung Lorgar's eyes as he desperately blocked each of his brother's attacks. Illuminarum's great hammerhead rang like a church bell as it battered aside the Raven Lord's claws.

'What are you doing?' Corax cried into his brother's face as their weapons locked. 'What madness has taken you all?'

Lorgar disengaged, hurling Corax backward with enough strength to leave his brother unbalanced. The Raven Lord compensated instantly, his flight pack breathing fire and propelling him back at his brother. Bladed wings flashed out to the side, but Lorgar was ready for them. He ignored their scraping, cutting wounds as they knifed through his armour, and focused on hammering Corax's claws aside. In the seconds' safety he bought for himself, Lorgar at last landed a true blow. Corax was sent sprawling again as the crozius pounded into his breastplate. The

power field around the maul's head struck with enough force to send a shockwave blasting out from the warring brothers, throwing all nearby Astartes to the ground.

In less time than it took to breathe in, Corax was back on his feet, thrusters firing, spearing at Lorgar once more.

'Answer me, traitor,' the Raven Lord grunted. His dark eyes were narrowed at the sickening light that haloed Lorgar. 'You… are a poor reflection of our father… with that psychic gold.'

Lorgar felt himself slipping back in the mud, his boots grinding across the earth as his brother's strength leaned heavier against him. He couldn't break the weapon lock this time. Both Corax's claws clutched at Illuminarum's haft, burning the handle and the Word Bearer's hands.

'I am bringing the truth to humanity,' Lorgar breathed.

'You are destroying the Imperium! *You are betraying your own blood!*' The wildness in the Raven Lord's black eyes was something Lorgar had never even imagined before. Corax had always seemed so taciturn, so devoid of passion. That this warrior lay beneath the albino facade was a horrendous revelation.

The claw tips, spitting with crackling power fields, were a finger's length from Lorgar's face now. 'I will kill you, Lorgar.'

'I know.' He spoke through gritted teeth, feeling strength bleed from his bones. 'But I have seen what will be. Our father, a bloodless corpse enthroned upon gold, and screaming into the void forever.'

'Lies.' The black eyes narrowed, and the Raven Lord's pale muscles bunched, locking harder. *'You are reducing a kingdom to chaos. Overthrowing the perfect order.'*

Lorgar's grey eyes danced with light despite the strain on his body. 'The opposite of chaos is not order, brother. It is stasis. Lifeless, unchanging… stasis.'

With a last grunt, Lorgar's strength gave. Quivering hands could no longer keep his brother's weapons back.

'Here it is,' Corax promised in a hiss, his saliva flecking Lorgar's eyes and cheeks. 'Here is the death you so richly deserve.'

The claws reached his brother's face. Slowly, the metal burning-hot, they sliced over Lorgar's golden skin. Inch by inch, blackening the golden flesh, cutting into the meat of his cheeks. Even should he escape, he would bear these scars until the day he died. He knew this, and did not care.

The psychic fire wreathing them both flared in response to Lorgar's pain. Corax closed his eyes to spare his sight, and instinct cost him his quick victory. Lorgar threw the Raven Lord back again. Illuminarum rose, ready to strike, before a burst of smoky fire launched the Raven Lord up from the soil to come down on Lorgar from above. The Word Bearer smashed the first claw aside, striking the fist with enough force to shatter the gauntlet completely, but even as scythe-long claw blades span off into the surrounding melee, the second claw struck home.

Metre-long talons sank through Lorgar's stomach, the tips glinting to the side of his spine as they thrust from his back. Such a blow meant little to a primarch – only when Corax heaved upwards did Lorgar stagger. The claws bit and cut, sawing through the Word Bearer's body.

Illuminarum slipped from the impaled primarch's fists. Those same hands wrapped around Corax's throat even as the Raven Lord was carving his brother in half.

'For the Emperor,' Corax breathed, untroubled by his weaker brother's grip. Lorgar crashed his forehead against Corax's face, shattering his brother's nose, but still he couldn't free himself. The Raven Lord gave no ground, even as a second, third and fourth head butt decimated his delicate features.

'But he lied to us,' Lorgar spoke through lips that produced more blood than language. 'Father lied.'

The claws jerked, snagged against Lorgar's enhanced bones. Corax tore them free, inflicting more damage than the first impaling had done. Blood hissed and popped as it evaporated on the force-fielded blades.

'Father lied,' Lorgar said again. He was on his knees, hands clutched over the ruination of his stomach.

Corax's black eyes gave nothing away. He stepped closer, his one functioning claw raised to execute his brother.

'Do it,' Lorgar snarled. The psychic wind, the misty fire – all were gone now. He was as he'd always been: Lorgar, the Seventeenth Son, the image of his father, the one soul in twenty who'd never wished to be a soldier. And here he would die, at the heart of a battlefield.

The foul irony of the moment settled on his shoulders, feeling grotesquely apt. He couldn't move his legs. His body was a temple to nothing but pain. He could barely even see his executioner, for his psychic efforts had left him quivering with both weakness and a vision-blurring ache in his mind. A faint outline met his gaze, the blurred image of scythe-blades raised high.

'Do it!' Lorgar screamed at his brother.

The claw fell, and struck opposing metal.

CORAX LOOKED TO meet eyes as black as his, in a face as pale as his own. His claw strained against a mirroring weapon, both sets of blades scraping as they ground against each other. One claw seeking to fall and kill, the other unyielding in its rising defence.

Where the Raven Guard primarch's features were fierce with effort, the other face wore a grin. It was a smile both taut and mirthless – a dead man's smile, once his lips surrendered to rigor mortis.

'Corax,' said the other primarch.

'Curze,' Corax said the name as the curse it was.

'Look into my eyes,' said the progenitor of the Night Lords Legion, 'and see your death.'

Corax sought to wrench his claw free, but Curze's second gauntlet closed on his brother's wrist. 'No,' Curze's laughter as was joyless as his smile. 'Do not fly away, little raven. Stay. We are not finished, you and I.'

'Konrad,' Corax tried. 'Why have you done this?'

Curze ignored the plea. He turned his void-like eyes on the prone Lorgar, with disgust written plain across his carcass face. 'Rise from your knees, you accursed coward.'

Lorgar sought to do just that, using his brother's midnight-blue armour as a crutch to haul himself to his feet. Curze bared his sharpened teeth. 'You are the foulest weakling I have ever seen, Lorgar.'

Corax was not idle as this exchange took place. He fired his flight pack, burning his fuel reserves to escape Curze's grip. The Raven Lord's claw ripped free, and Corax soared skyward, carried on jet thrust away from Curze's rising laughter.

On the ground, Curze shook himself free of Lorgar. 'Sevatar,' he spoke into the vox. 'The Raven comes to you, to free his men.'

Battle sounds. Bolter fire. The roar of tank engines. 'We will deal with him, lord.'

'See that you do.' Curze shoved Lorgar back towards his Word Bearers. Around them both, the grey Legion warred with the warriors in black. 'I am done with you, golden one. Go back to killing Astartes with your pretty hammer.'

Lorgar's preternatural biology was regenerating his damaged tissue with alacrity, but the primarch was shivery and weak as he reached for the fallen crozius.

'Thank you, Konrad.'

Curze spat at Lorgar's feet. 'I will let you die next time. And if you…'

The Night Lord trailed off, his black eyes narrowing as he watched the figures appearing at Lorgar's side. Their armour was crimson ceramite and ridged bone. Great claws, both metallic weapons and fleshy, jointed talons, extended from bestial arms. Every helm was horned. Every faceplate was split by a daemon's skullish leer.

'You are so much more than merely foul,' Curze turned his back. 'You are rancid in your corruption.'

Lorgar watched his brother stalking back through the ranks of Night Lords and Word Bearers, wading through them to reach the Raven Guard once more. Soon enough, the silver claws began to rise and fall as they always had, shearing through the armoured bodies of Curze's enemies.

Lorgar turned to the Gal Vorbak. 'Argel Tal,' he smiled at one of them, knowing him instantly.

The creature grunted, twitchy with the need to shed blood. 'It is I, sire.'

'The warriors I would need,' Lorgar murmured the old words with awe tainting his breath. 'Truly, you are blessed by the gods. Go. Hunt. Kill.'

The Gal Vorbak withdrew from their lord, launching themselves back into the battle with leaps and snarls. Argel Tal lingered. A claw of ceramite and bone closed on Lorgar's arm.

'Father. I could not reach you in time.'

'It does not matter. I live still. Hunt well, my son.'

The daemon nodded and obeyed.

THUNDERHAWK GUNSHIPS IN the colours of the Raven Guard and the Salamanders exploded at the launch site as the Iron Warriors turned their weapons from the slaughter and targeted the loyalists' only avenues of escape.

Despite the grind of battle, dozens of the landing craft managed to make it back into the air. Most of these were soon sent spiralling back down to earth, streaming black smoke from lascannon wounds in propulsion systems. The Iron Warriors fired with impunity, caring nothing that many of the downed gunships fell groundward into the battle still being waged. The burning hulls of destroyed Astartes craft rained onto the killing fields, pulverising Word Bearers and Night Lords more often than they crashed into the few remaining pockets of Raven Guard and Salamanders survivors.

When contacted by Legion commanders protesting the careless destruction, the Iron Warriors captains replied with laughter that bordered on betrayal.

'We are all bleeding today,' an Iron Warriors captain voxed back to Kor Phaeron. '*Have faith,* Word Bearer.' The link went dead to the sound of chuckling.

Time ceased to have any meaning for Argel Tal. When he was not killing, he was moving, hunting, seeking something else to

kill. His claws savaged any Raven Guard warrior that came within his grip. Corax had thinned the ranks of the Gal Vorbak before Lorgar's intercession, but enough of the chosen sons remained to form a feral pack that led their Legion, cutting into the diminishing foe.

In battle, he changed. His was not the ascendant consciousness. He ceded a measure of control to Raum, the surrender coming as naturally as breathing: it seemed simply a function of his new form. The daemon in possession added strength to even his lighter blows, and tore chunks from his enemies even as Argel Tal sought only to clutch onto them. His every motion was made feverish, hungrier somehow, drenched in blood and inhuman needs. As he wrapped his claws around a Raven Guard's throat with the intent to strangle, his talons sank into the warrior's neck and hooked around his spine. Every motion was instinctively more violent, breeding more pain in those foolish enough to stand before him.

Many of the Raven Guard sought to run. Argel Tal let these live, knowing his grey-armoured kin would cut these down with their bolters. It was a chore to resist the animalistic need to chase down prey – just seeing them flee from him was enough to tense his muscles into the desire for pursuit – but he knew his role in this war. He was a warrior, not a hunter.

A connection he'd not known existed went hollow and cold, and he felt, rather than saw, Dagotal die.

You are all bound. Blessed and bound.

A second of pain, like the memory of an old wound, and a curious loss stole over him. It was a lessening, as if the warmth of the sun had fallen behind a greying sky. The momentary chill passed, but the knowledge of his brother's demise was etched into him, as cold as a stone in his skull.

He died in fire. Raum's voice was as ecstatic as it was breathless. A cascade of chopping images flickered in Argel Tal's mind, showing Dagotal engulfed in flame, surrounded by Raven Guard bearing flamer units. They bathed him in the corrosive fire, layer-

ing chemical propellant over his mutated armour, stoic against the unbelievable stench their murder was making.

The images flashed away, and Argel Tal dropped the corpse he'd strangled. Immediately, the need took him again. Like a hunger, a need for satiation, he physically ached unless he was moving toward prey. And he knew this ferocious need was the only emotion the neverborn could ever feel. This was how their minds worked – in stunted, brutal instinct.

The daemon moved to sate his new hunger.

THE TREMORS EASED, but didn't cease. Still, Ishaq was thankful for small mercies. Nonessential bulkheads were grinding open now. The red light staining everything flickered back to standard illumination. He assumed *De Profundis* was pulling free of the main battle for… some reason. To rearm? To regroup? Whatever, he didn't know and it didn't matter. He was bolting through the corridors the moment he heard the first bulkhead unsealing.

Many were still shut tight, blocking off voided sections of the deck. This, too, didn't matter. He didn't want to explore any more, he just wanted to get out of here alive.

It was strangely worse to slow down and walk solemnly past Euchar infantry patrols than it was to pick and weave between the dead bodies that adorned some of the more damaged corridors. The Euchar squads were here to clean up, and he didn't envy them that job. On several occasions, he moved past them in a dignified walk, seeing them gathering the fallen and bagging them up. He made sure his face was covered by the serf hood, and did his best to seem as if he paid little heed.

Once he was free of the monastic deck, he made his way to the Cellar, shaking loose the Legion robe on his way. His picter scanner was kept in a white-knuckled grip that would've broken a cheaper, less sturdy model.

The doors opened before him, revealing the Cellar in all its bustling slum hole glory. Even in the midst of the battle, the rembrancers and civilian crew had gathered here, gambling and drinking and doing their damndest to ignore the war raging out-

side. In truth, he didn't blame them. He'd done it himself in smaller battles before.

His hands were shaking when he reached an empty table. A passing girl brought him something he didn't order, and wouldn't like even if he was in the mood to drink it. He scattered the few coins he had left, not caring that he overpaid. He just needed to be around people. Normal people.

'Ishaq Kadeen. The imagist. I have your pict of *De Profundis.* A masterpiece, young sir.'

Ishaq looked up to meet the speaker's dark-ringed eyes. He recognised the old man immediately.

'You're the astropath. The astropath for the Occuli Imperator.'

'Guilty,' the old man performed a strangely courtly bow, 'as charged.' He gestured to the chair. 'Absolom Cartik at your service. May I sit?'

Ishaq's grunt passed as a yes. The elder seemed nervous in the Cellar, just as he had last time Ishaq saw him in here. 'I've not seen you in a couple of weeks. There was talk you'd be forsaking this place for good.'

'I do not fit in well, but at times, the quiet gets to me. I feel the need to be around other people.' Cartik gestured to the walls. 'The battle,' he swallowed. 'They always get to me.'

'I know that feeling. Sorry, but I'm not exactly wonderful company right now,' Ishaq said.

The astropath was watching him with unwavering focus. 'Your thoughts are very loud.'

All the blood drained from Kadeen's face. 'You're reading my mind?' He stood up fast enough to make himself dizzy. 'Is that legal?'

The astropath waved his concerns aside. 'I could never read a mind as you would understand it. Suffice to say, you are broadcasting your emotion with great intensity. Just as someone might see you laugh or cry, knowing your thoughts from your face, I can see the distress in your mind. No details, but it is very… loud,' he finished lamely.

'I don't need this right now. I really don't.'

'I meant no offence.'

Ishaq took his seat again. The ship shook under enemy fire – enough to spill people's drinks. Most pretended to ignore it. A few faked laughter, as if it were all part of the adventure.

'Might I ask if you have any more masterpieces in the making?' the old man asked. Ishaq glanced at his picter rod.

'I'm not sure. Maybe. Look, I have to go.' He squeezed his eyes shut, but everything looked the same when he opened them again. 'I don't want to be around anyone after all. And I'm not going to drink this, so consider it a gift.'

He slid the glass across the table. As Cartik took it, the astropath's finger brushed the imagist's knuckles. The elder jumped if kicked, staring with wide eyes. He looked as suddenly unwell as Ishaq felt.

'By the Throneworld…' he stammered. 'Wh-what have you seen?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. Goodbye.'

Absolom Cartik's elderly claw gripped onto the younger man's wrist with all the tenacity of a raptor talon. 'Where. Was. This.'

'I didn't see anything, you crazy old bastard.'

Their eyes met. 'You wish to answer the question,' Cartik said softly.

'I saw it on board the ship.'

'Where?'

'The monastic deck.'

'And you made recorded images? Evidence of what you saw?'

'Yes.'

Cartik released the man's wrist. 'Come with me, please.'

'What? No chance.'

'Come with me. What you have seen must be shown to the Occuli Imperator. If you refuse, I can guarantee you only one thing: Custodian Aquillon will kill you for attempting to keep this a secret. He will kill *everyone* who has kept this a secret.'

The emergency lighting dimmed back into life. Complaints rang out across the Cellar, and the vessel around them shivered

as its engines flared open again. They were returning to the battle.

'I'll… come with you.'

Absolom Cartik smiled. He was an ugly man – and age hadn't helped change that fact – but he wore the kind of paternal, assured smile that stayed in a family's memory for many years.

'Yes,' the old man said. 'I thought you might.'

TWENTY-EIGHT

Aftermath
Blood is Life
An Unusual Welcome

HE FOUND DAGOTAL after the battle.

First, he came across his brother's jetbike, powerless and half-buried in the Urgall dirt. Not crashed. Abandoned. Abandoned when the change took place, abandoned in favour of running and killing with one's own claws.

He moved on, stepping over the bodies of slain Raven Guard, their white Legion symbol tarnished by mud or split by savage weapons. A warrior nearby still lived, his breath straining from a broken mouth grille. With a reaching claw, Argel Tal enclosed the Raven Guard's neck, squeezing the soft armour there and ending the warrior's life with the popping crackle of destroyed vertebrae.

There was no flood of endorphins from a hunger momentarily sated. With each minute that passed, Raum's consciousness ebbed from Argel Tal's mind with the helpless loss of sand slipping through his fingers. With the daemon's recession, Argel Tal's own instincts and emotions rebuilt themselves in his mind. In place of bloodlust and unnatural appetites, he felt hollow, and used, and so very, very tired.

His shadow stretched before him, made uneven by the dead bodies it fell across. Great horns curled from his helm. His body was a nightmare of protruding bone ridges and crimson ceramite. His legs were… He didn't even have the words. They were jointed like a beast's hind legs – a lion or a wolf – and end-

ed in huge hooves of black bone. His warplate still covered them, leaving his silhouette like the shade of a creature from unholy myth.

Argel Tal turned from his shadow. A wet, burbling growl rumbled in his throat. That scent. He snuffed the air twice. Familiar. Yes.

He stalked away, letting his shadow fall across other bodies. There. Dagotal. A blackened thing, ripe with the scent of baked blood and life reduced to ash. Grey and red armour was strewn all about him, making his husk the cremated statue at the heart of a fallen Word Bearers pack. In the deepest distance, bolters still chattered. Why? The battle was over. Prisoner execution, perhaps. It did not matter.

Still infused with the aftermath of Raum's inhuman perception, he sensed the others approaching. All of them resembled Argel Tal to some degree. Malnor was a twitching, brutish thing, his bunched musculature claimed by frequent spasms. Torgal hunched as he moved, his faceplate moulded into a snarling face entirely lacking eyes. Argel Tal knew without asking that Torgal was blind. Perhaps he was aided by scent and sound, but he hunted by the daemonic awareness of mortality nearby. Instead of the claws most of the Gal Vorbak now sported, Torgal's arms ended in lengthy bone blades, hooked like primitive scimitars. Jagged, knuckly teeth roughened the surface of them, showing where they'd once been his chainblades.

Eleven of the Gal Vorbak remained alive. Corax had slain over two dozen – their dismembered parts now scattered over the nearby area – red amidst the grey. In the heat of the battle, it had been an easy matter to ride Raum's perceptions, discarding the fragmentary pulsing pain of his brothers' lives ending. But now, in the bitter dusk, their absence was harder to ignore. Their loss left him cold.

With the passing minutes, Argel Tal could feel the daemon's quiet, small presence wrapped in a crippling exhaustion. Raum was not gone, nor truly distant. The daemon slumbered, its cold weight seeking to warm itself within the Word Bearer's mind.

The horrendous changes inflicted upon his body and armour began to undo themselves at last. Ceramite cracked and resealed. Bony protrusions sank back beneath his skin, dragged back into the bones from whence they came. As Ingethel had promised so long ago, it was not a painless process, but by now the Gal Vorbak had passed through the fire of that particular torment. Pain was just pain, and they'd endured so much worse. A few grunted as the changes unwrought and their Astartes physiques reformed, but none voiced a lament as bones creaked and muscles condensed.

Still, they'd been seen. Warriors from the other Legions had seen them during and after the battle, and made their distasteful fascination shown in varying measures. The Night Lords seemed particularly unwilling to approach the Gal Vorbak. When Argel Tal had neared Sevatar, the captain had removed his helm to spit acid on the ground by the Word Bearer's feet. The Sons of Horus – the Warmaster's own – were more willing to approach and speak of the change. Argel Tal was unwilling to indulge them, but Xaphen, the slowest by far in resuming his Astartes form, seemed all too keen to enlighten the Sons of what the future held for the gods' chosen warriors.

Argel Tal waited an hour for his bones to cease their creakaching, but the sense of relief was nothing short of divine when he disengaged his collar seals and pulled his helm free.

The battlefield stank of engine breath and chemical-rich blood, but he had no sense to spare for anything beyond the feel of the wind rushing over his face for the first time in so many weeks.

Boot steps, heavy and assured, came from behind. He knew who it would be without needing to turn.

'How does it feel?' came the expected voice.

'Strong. Pure. Righteous. But then cold, and hollow. Violated.' Argel Tal turned to meet the other's eyes. 'I feel the daemon within me now, weakened and slumbering. Even after knowing the change would grip and fade in tides like this, it was like nothing I can describe. I am uneasy in the knowledge it will hap-

pen again, but I also feel anticipation for it. I… I lack the words to do it justice.'

'We saw you fight,' said the other. 'The "blessed sons" indeed.'

Argel Tal sighed, still enjoying the world's air instead of the filtered oxygen of his warplate. 'I was spiteful to you before the battle, master. I ask forgiveness.'

Erebus's smile didn't reach his lips, but the momentary warmth of sincerity showed in his gaze. 'Master no more.'

Argel Tal broke the look to stare out over the battlefield. Thousands and thousands of armoured bodies. Hundreds of wrecked tanks. Gunship hulls, still burning in their craters. Roaring cheers from the ranks of the World Eaters as they gathered skulls. The buzzing grind of chainblades as the warriors of seven Traitor Legions looted the dead for trophies and relics.

'I do not regret taking the sword instead of the crozius all those years ago. As I've proven so many times since, I lack the words to be a preacher.'

Erebus came alongside his former pupil, looking out over the desolation. His armour showed clear signs of the battle, cracked and scorched all over. Erebus was never one to send his warriors into battle without leading them in himself. The bas-relief etchings of his deeds in neat Colchisian were discoloured by burn markings and stripped paint showing flashes of metallic ceramite beneath.

'I believe that night may have been the very first incident of an Astartes seeking to kill another Astartes.'

Argel Tal remembered it well. 'The primarch told me, long ago when I last stood in the City of Grey Flowers, that you had forgiven me for that night.'

'The primarch was right.'

Argel Tal narrowed his eyes. 'I never *asked* for your forgiveness. Not for that.'

'It is yours, nevertheless. You still believe I went too far in my methods. I do not. We will never agree upon it. Do you believe you were right in your reaction? To draw a weapon against a brother? To seek to slay a Chaplain of your own Legion?'

'Yes.' Argel Tal's gaze was unwavering. 'I still believe that. I would have killed you, had I the chance.'

Erebus remained impassive. 'Beside that first and last betrayal, you were a better student than you give yourself credit for. Loyal, intelligent, and strong of both heart and will.'

Loyal.

Raum's thought was somnolent, barely formed in a veil of fogged weariness. It brought Argel Tal on guard, as he expected the daemon's intent had been.

'Sometimes I wonder,' he said, 'just how much of our loyalty is written into our blood.'

Erebus wasn't blind to the inference. 'The gene-seed changes every Legion, but the Word Bearers would not follow Aurelian into damnation and triumph with equal passion. We follow him because he is right, not because we must.'

Argel Tal nodded, neither agreeing nor arguing.

'I need answers,' the Gal Vorbak commander said. His tone was cold and clear, and Erebus turned upon hearing it.

'Is this really the time?' he asked.

Argel Tal fixed his former mentor with a cynical scowl. 'We stand in the midst of two Legions brought to extinction by traitorous hands, and walk the first battlefield of an Imperial civil war. There will never be a better time to talk of betrayal, Erebus.'

The slightest edge of a smile coloured the Chaplain's lips. 'Ask.'

'You already know what I would ask, so spare me speaking the question.'

'The primarch.' Erebus was utterly neutral once more, ever the statesman. 'You would have me relay what we have done in the main Legion fleet for forty years? There is no time for such discussion. Much of what we learned is contained within the *Book of Lorgar*.'

A curl to his lips showed how little Argel Tal liked that answer. 'Which, it seems, you have written half of,' the Gal Vorbak lord said.

Erebus acquiesced to this with a shallow nod. 'I have added to the rituals and prayers within, yes. As has Kor Phaeron. We have

learned much, and have guided the primarch as often as he has guided us.'

Argel Tal growled his displeasure. 'Be clearer.'

'As you wish. A moment, please.' Erebus knelt to slide his gladius into the throat of a twitching Raven Guard warrior. As they walked on, he wiped blood from the blade with an oiled cloth from his belt pouch.

'You do not know what it was like, Argel Tal. After venturing into the Great Eye, Lorgar was… distraught. His faith in the Emperor was already destroyed, and the truth he found at the galaxy's edge tormented him as much as it inspired him. Indecision gripped him for months. Kor Phaeron took command of the fleet for a second time, and we did little but vent our wrath across the worlds we came across. Despite Lorgar's return, the Legion felt no joy from the primarch's presence. In truth, Aurelian wasn't certain humanity was ready to learn of such… horror.'

Argel Tal's skin crawled. 'Horror?'

'The primarch's own word, not mine.' Erebus nudged another body with his boot. When a rasping breath wheezed from its mouth grille, the Chaplain repeated his execution, cleaning the blade again afterwards. 'The Legion never struggled to adopt the new faith. We are philosophers as much as warriors, and take pride in such. All could see how the gods had seeded their worship into our culture from generations in the past. The constellations. The cults that always looked skyward for answers. The Old Ways themselves. Few Word Bearers resisted the truth, for most had always felt it on some level.'

'Few resisted…' An uncomfortable thought climbed Argel Tal's spine with prickling fingers. 'Was there a purge? A purge of our own ranks?'

Erebus weighed his answer before giving it voice. 'Not all wished to turn on the Imperium. They believed that stagnancy was strength, that stasis was preservation. No such reluctance remains in the Legion now.'

So Word Bearer had slain Word Bearer, unseen by the eyes of other Legions. Argel Tal breathed slowly, not wishing to ask yet unable to resist. 'How many died?'

'Enough.' Erebus took no joy in confessing it. 'Not many – nothing like the numbers of those who were culled from the faithless Legions – but enough.'

They moved around the charred hull of a Sons of Horus Rhino. The armoured personnel carrier's tracks were shattered and scattered like teeth punched from a jaw, while the sloped green hull was pockmarked with bolter fire. Erebus glanced inside. The driver was dead, slain by the shell that destroyed the tank's front plating, his sea-green ceramite ruptured with shrapnel as he lay slack in his seat.

'Why do I sense that was not your only question,' he muttered.

Argel Tal scratched his cheek, and the motion turned into a subtle check, feeling his face for any further changes. He was himself again, at least for now. The mutations were locked inside his genetic code as the daemon slumbered. He knew they'd return soon enough. Just dwelling on the thought was enough to set Raum stirring, the daemon slowly writhing in its repose, like a creature shifting in its sleep.

'The Custodes,' he said. 'We have suffered a long exile to keep them alive. Xaphen's ritual kept them silenced. Tell me why, Erebus. We have ached to be by the primarch's side.'

'So has every Word Bearer in every one of the Legion's fleets.'

'We are the Gal Vorbak.' Argel Tal crashed a fist into the Rhino's flank, denting the armour plating.

'Temper, Argel Tal.'

'We,' the commander repeated, 'are the Gal Vorbak. We brought the truth to the primarch at the cost of our own souls. I am not demanding glorification. I am asking for a reason why we were kept in exile.'

Erebus walked on, leaving the tank, and the two Salamanders warriors it had crushed, behind. 'You came to reflect a side of the primarch's doubts, until Kor Phaeron and I were able to reignite his conviction. We travelled to those first worlds we conquered –

the ones that we'd allowed the Old Ways to in secret remain out of respect. On those worlds, Lorgar's passion to enlighten the Imperium was reforged anew.'

'So why were we not recalled? Xaphen's ritual to silence the Custodes—'

'I know the ritual,' Erebus snapped. 'I wrote the ritual myself, after weeks of communion. Only then did I provide it to Xaphen, and it has been refined each time the invocation was cast.'

The invocation. A spell. Sorcery. Argel Tal shuddered. The word alone was enough to make his skin crawl. On the hillside, the first construction work was beginning on a towering funeral pyre, and a platform for the Sons of Horus to aggrandise themselves above the 'lesser' Legions. Argel Tal and Erebus paid the work little heed.

'I can read the reluctance in your voice, Argel Tal. You do not burn with fervour to kill them, and I will see through any lies you tell me otherwise.'

'I have no desire to slay them. We have grown closer over time, bonding through battle. But I must know why they were ordered to be spared.'

'I need them alive,' the Chaplain admitted at last.

'Obviously,' Argel Tal snorted. 'But why?'

'Because of what they are. Imagine a life form that cannot reproduce. Imagine it self-replicates instead, but the process is not perfect. It only achieves immortality for its species by creating weaker versions of itself down the generations. We are an example of this. From the Emperor came the primarchs, from the primarchs came the true Astartes. We are a species that names the Emperor not only as our inceptor, but our grandfather.'

Argel Tal nodded, waiting for Erebus to continue. He felt the threat of a smile as he recalled their lessons just like this, back in the days of tutor and student, master and acolyte.

'We are the third generation of this genetic line. But what if our fleshworkers, our Apothecaries, and our psychically-gifted warriors could use our link to the Emperor as a weapon against him? Should we not capitalise on that possibility?'

Argel Tal shrugged a shoulder. 'I do not see how we could.'

Erebus chuckled. 'Think back to the Old Ways, and the lore you know of that faith from archives. Think back to the superstition and dogma that the Emperor has sought to banish from the sphere of human knowledge in his precious "Great Crusade". How much of humanity's clearest, core beliefs centred around sacrifice and spells fuelled by blood? Blood is life. Blood is the focus of a million magics, linking invoker and victim, or serving as an offering to reach the higher powers within the warp. If you have a being's blood, you can tailor a poison to slay them and no other – a venom bred to end a single life, but to spare all others.'

'And our blood is the blood of the Emperor,' Argel Tal finished for him.

'Yes. But it is thinned and filtered by mass production, with too many artificial chemical components, making it too weak to use in either alchemy or sorcery. The link to our grandsire is far too tenuous.'

Alchemy. Sorcery. Argel Tal found it starkly ironic that even with a daemon in his heart, he hated to hear of these words spoken so lightly. Truly, the winds of change had blown hard in the four decades of his unofficial exile.

Erebus looked across the battlefield, where the Iron Warriors were gathering bodies with the blunt efficiency so typical of the Legion's attitude to warfare. Tanks fitted with great plough blades heaved through piles of the slain, sending the bodies tumbling along towards the funeral pyre.

'Do you understand?' he asked, without taking his eyes from the funerary work.

'You believe the Custodes offer a closer link to the Emperor.'

'I do. They are born from the same genetic code, though ours was filtered for mass production. They are purer for their rarity, if not their quality.'

It was an old assumption, and one with no proof, to claim that the Emperor was a primarch to the Custodian Guard. Argel Tal shook his head.

'You need living Custodes for their blood,' he said, 'in the hopes of chasing what may well be a myth.'

'All weapons must be considered.' Erebus was composed. 'No one but the Emperor has ever had the chance to study the Custodes, and knowledge is power. It must be guarded well. We have tried rituals with the blood of eleven Legions now, and all results met with disaster. What if we master the secrets of the Custodian genus? We could harness that lore to strengthen ourselves, not simply harm our foes. The Custodians in the main fleet, led by Iacus, were killed in battle long ago. Aquillon and his minions present one of the few remaining opportunities. Their blood must be borne from a beating heart for the rituals to have any hope of success.'

Another thought occurred, and Argel Tal spoke before considering it. 'Are not the primarchs closest to the Emperor? You could use their blood for these… rituals.'

Erebus laughed. For the first time in Argel Tal's life, he heard the First Chaplain really, honestly laughing. 'Truth,' Erebus smiled, 'from the mouths of babes. Do you see any willing primarchs? We failed to capture any of the Emperor's sons here, and you will not find Horus or even Aurelian eager to let their blood be manipulated in such a way.'

Argel Tal hesitated. In his hand, his helm emitted a vox-crackle.

'My lord?' came the voice of Fleetmaster Torvus. The Word Bearer replaced his helm with a deep sigh of reluctance. His clear vision was immediately stained dark and flickered with targeting markers.

'This is Argel Tal.'

'Sir, our final four ships have broken from the warp. The Occuli Imperator is demanding to board *De Profundis* immediately.'

'Allow it. It no longer matters. They will have their suspicions, but only evidence would rouse them to fury. We are returning to orbit within the hour, and will deal with them then. Has the ship sustained damage?'

'A great deal, but we've held it together through spit, grit and prayer. The only damage you will consider vital was taken on

the Legion's sanctum deck. Several breaches, but all hull wounds are isolated and secured.'

Argel Tal swallowed. 'The Blessed Lady?'

'Secure and well. A Euchar force investigated not thirty minutes ago. The enemy fleet is dust and wreckage in orbit. How fares the surface battle?'

Argel Tal scanned the devastation for several moments before answering. 'We won, Baloc. That's enough for now.'

AQUILLON WALKED FROM the eagle-winged shuttle and onto the empty hangar deck. He'd never seen it so quiet: a hollow space of silent, waiting cranes and idle servitors standing by their wall-stations. The Legion was deployed, and everything the Word Bearers commanded had been committed to the world below.

At the base of the ramp, several figures were waiting for him. Sythran inclined his head in silence. Kalhin and Nirallus likewise didn't salute – it wasn't their custom to show obeisance to anyone but the Emperor, beloved by all. The three warriors held their guardian spears in loose grips, but their body language and postures suggested restraint, rather than simply remaining casual. He could read the telltale tension in their muscles, even beneath their golden armour.

The other two figures drew Aquillon's attention. The first was Cartik, who offered a deep bow. The old man was sweating in the cold hangar, and his ageing heart beat in an accelerated, irregular rhythm. The second was unknown to him. Dusky-skinned and keen of eye, daunted by nothing he bore witness to. A brave soul, this one. Or reckless.

'A curious welcome,' the Occuli Imperator said softly. He was not angry – not yet, at least – but his patience had bled dry many hours before. The loss of contact with the Word Bearers fleet left him rattled, and this was indeed an unusual welcome. He knew something was wrong the moment he saw his brothers waiting for him below.

'Your ships were "delayed" as well,' Aquillon surmised. 'You were prevented from reaching the battle at all.' All three warriors nodded.

'I was first to arrive,' Nirallus said. 'Less than ten minutes ago. The approach to the fleet was a nightmare, and the auspex chimed out with hundreds of dead ships in the upper atmosphere. It will rain steel on Isstvan V for decades to come.'

'I saw the same,' admitted Aquillon. 'No sign of any vessels bearing the traitors' colours, but the loyal Legions have suffered horrendous losses themselves. And the wreckage patterns did not suggest accurate numbers. It seems two Legions have been annihilated. Others who were supposed to be present were simply never here.'

'I have not been able to reach Argel Tal,' said Kalhin. 'Or anyone else on the surface.'

Aquillon looked down at the two humans. 'Explain their presence.'

Sythran stepped forward, and offered Aquillon a bulky plastek picter rod. The imagifier was of expensive make, that much was clear. Aquillon took it, but didn't look at the viewscreen.

'You are an imagist?' he asked the human.

'Ishaq Kadeen,' the man replied. 'Yes, I'm an imagist. You activate the—'

'I know how it works, Ishaq Kadeen.' Aquillon thumbed the activation setting along the haft, and the small screen blinked into life.

Aquillon processed what he was seeing. His education and training at the Emperor's side allowed him a broad view of human capability, and the possibilities of technology in union with living beings. He had never seen anything quite like this before, but he knew immediately what it had to be.

The Occuli Imperator handed the picter to Ishaq, who took with a mutter of gratitude. 'You found this on the sanctum deck, I assume?' Aquillon enquired.

'The monastic deck? Yes.'

'Of course.' And then, with infinite dignity, Aquillon reached to unsheathe his blade. 'My brothers,' he said. 'We are betrayed.'

'I do not much like our chances against an entire vessel's crew, even with the Legion off-ship. What do you suggest?' asked Kalhin.

'First, we find the depths of this betrayal. I must see this madness for myself, and tear the truth from the lips of those that keep it. Before we can even consider cutting out the cancer at this rebellion's heart, we must secure passage to Terra and relay every detail to the Emperor.'

'Beloved by all,' said Kalhin and Nirallus at once. Sythran tapped his knuckles to his chestplate, over his heart. Ishaq's own 'beloved by all' came a couple of awkward seconds later, though none of the others were paying him any attention anymore.

'This will be a great deal of work,' Kalhin grunted.

'Who do we interrogate?' asked Nirallus. There was no doubt in his voice – he didn't ask because he had no idea of an answer, he asked because there were too many possible names and the decision ultimately rested with Aquillon. 'The fleetmaster? The general?'

'There's one soul on this ship that has listened to the Word Bearers whisper their secrets for half a century. We will find this precious soul not far from where you found the evidence of their treachery. Come with me.'

'H-how will you get onto the monastic deck?' Cartik was already falling behind, practically ignored by the Custodes.

'We will kill everyone that stands in our way,' Nirallus replied as if the answer were obvious. 'Return to your room, old one. It will not be safe at our side.'

The Custodes moved forward, blades drawn. Aquillon let emotion curl his lip into an ugly snarl. 'Cyrene,' he hissed. 'Their *"Blessed lady"*.'

TWENTY-NINE

Cyrene
Never Human
A Completed Vow

SHE LIFTED HER head at the sound of blades against her door, though of course, she saw nothing. Heat came at her in a breathy wave, emanating in her direction from the thudding steel portal. Power weapons, then. They were cutting through with power weapons.

Cyrene typed as fast as she could, her fingertips dancing over the familiar keypad, but her efforts ended mid-sentence. The door slammed to the floor, and the thrum of live power armour filled the room. Joints whirred. False fibre-bundle muscles purred.

'Aquillon. I knew you would c—'

'Be silent, traitorous whore. The Word Bearers are gone, and you will answer to the authority of the Emperor. Order your maids to flee, or they will suffer alongside you.'

Cyrene inclined her head in a slight nod. The two older women fled the room barely short of a run.

'Brother…' began Kalhin, turning to the secondary chamber and the open door leading into it. Another figure had appeared there, doubtless hiding in wait.

'The Word Bearers,' it said, 'are not all gone.'

'You have no place here, tech-adept,' Aquillon gestured with the point of his sword.

'Correct.' Xi-Nu 73 applied an exact amount of pressure on the trigger of the signum control in his left hand, and a massive fig-

ure made of gears and armour plating moved into view behind him. It took up the entire door arch as it gave a mechanical growl of warning. Xi-Nu 73 steeled himself to finish speaking. 'I have no place here. But he does.'

The robot's arms, both mounted with heavy bolter cannons, were preloaded and cycled live – they'd been powered up for hours, ready for this worst of possible moments. Cyrene hurled herself off the bed, seeking all the distance she could put between herself and Aquillon.

'For the Legion.' The voice was like steel bars tumbling over rock.

The Custodes were already moving, their halberds spinning, when *Incarnadine* opened up at them with a horrendous storm of fire.

ARGEL TAL SPRINTED up the gunship's ramp, his boots clanging all the way into the troop bay. He was the last aboard. The vox was a hive of conflicting voices as the Gal Vorbak snapped at him to hurry. Other Thunderhawks, proud in the Legion's grey, were already lifting off.

'Take off,' he ordered the pilot over the vox, unashamed by the threat of panic in his voice. 'Get us back to the ship.'

Rising Sun shivered as its claws left the parched soil.

Argel Tal switched vox-channels. 'Jesmetine. General, are you there?'

Distortion.

'Answer me, Arric.'

'Lord.' The general was breathless. 'Lord, they are loose.'

'We just received the warning. Tell me exactly what has happened.'

'They landed. The Custodes landed. They stormed the monastic deck soon after. Something has enraged them. They must have discovered the truth, though I've no idea how. All Euchar forces there are out of contact or already confirmed dead. One of them, *one of them,* is holding the corridor leading to Cyrene's chamber. Blood of the gods, Argel Tal… he has a barricade made from the

bodies of my men. Every charge sees more cut down. We cannot overwhelm one of them, let alone four.'

The Word Bearer felt the gunship lurch beneath his feet. 'We have started primus burn, and are en route. What of Xi-Nu 73?' Across the vox, he could hear the snap-crack of lasguns barking their payloads. More Euchar engaging in futility.

'No word,' the elder general replied. 'Not a damn word. Where the hell are you?'

'We are on our way.' *Raum?* he quested.

Weak. The link was sluggish and feeble. *Slumber.*

The gunship climbed, its engines exhaling smoke and flame as it left the killing fields far below.

SYTHRAN FOUGHT AS he always fought: in the perfection of silence and solitude. Everything was in motion to an exacting standard – each twist of the spear haft brought the blade up to block las-fire or down to cut flesh, while each weave and duck was performed with the necessary vigour to keep him unwounded, but never left him overbalanced or needing to reposition himself. His footwork was stoic and rigid only long enough to kill the nearest soldier, before blending back into the dance of movement.

They fell back again. No, they *fled.*

Behind his faceplate, Sythran smiled. The bolter on his spear juddered with its release, punching explosive shells into the spines of all who were cowardly enough to turn their backs on him. The rhythmic pound of detonation after detonation made an abattoir of the hallway. Sythran went prone behind a mound of the dead, spinning his spear to hold the blade end. A clunk, a click, and the weapon was reloaded. Sythran rose again, already cutting the air with grand sweeps, batting aside the streaking laser fire.

'Syth,' crackled Aquillon's voice. 'We move.'

Sythran returned an acknowledgement blip by blinking at the affirmation rune on his retinal display. More Euchar, so very proud in their dull orange fatigues, came charging down the cor-

ridor. Sythran leapt his cadaver barricade and met them head on. They fell in pieces, and beyond a las-burn along his shoulder guard, the blood on his blade was the only evidence he'd even been fighting. The corridor was clear for now, populated by dead fools who'd believed they could bayonet him where their fellows had failed. Sythran looked over his shoulder in time to see his brothers emerge from the witch's cell. But only two. Nirallus and Aquillon, their armour pitted and cracked by incendiary fire.

Perhaps they detected his questioning glance without seeing his face, for Aquillon said 'Kalhin is dead. We must hurry.'

Well did he mark the blood shining on Aquillon's sword point.

XI-NU 73 SIGHED. It vocalised from his rebreather mask as an insect's buzzing. The sensory inhibitors lining his nerves like insulating cable around wire were doing all they could, but they failed to entirely mute the pain of shutting down. Shutting down? Dying. In his final mortal moments, he couldn't resist the biological descriptor. Such resonance. Dying… Death… So dramatic.

He laughed, and made more static-laden buzzing. It became a cough that tasted of spoiled oil.

With his one remaining hand, the adept started the laborious task of dragging himself across the floor. A potential subroutine to this task presented itself as he moved. Could he not stop halfway and examine the corpse of the human female?

A cost/benefit analysis flickered in his thought-core. Yes. He could. But he would not. The subroutine was discarded. His hand clawed at the smooth deck, and he dragged himself another half-metre with the squeal of his metal body along the floor. All the while, functionality statistics formed charts behind his eyes. He realised there was a chance, though small, that he would terminate before he reached his objective. It spurred him on, while the bionic nodules attached to his few remaining mortal organs stimulated the fading flesh with jolts of electrical energy and injections of emergency chemicals.

The tech-adept was blind by the time he reached his destination. His visual receptors had failed, as blank as a monitor with no power. He felt his hand clank against his intended target, and used the motionless bulk to pull himself closer. The fallen robot was a toppled statue, a fallen avatar of the Machine-God, and Xi-Nu 73 embraced it as one would a beloved son.

'There,' he murmured, barely hearing his voice as his aural receptors failed next. 'Duty done. Honoured. Name inscribed. In. Archive of. Visionary. Merit.' His throat vocaliser failed at the last word, leaving him mute for the remainder of his existence.

Xi-Nu 73 expired twenty-three seconds later as his augmetic organs powered down without hope of restarting. He would have taken no pleasure at all in the irony that his withered organs of meat strove on for half a minute more, still trying to feed life through a body that couldn't process it.

THE CHAMBER REMAINED still and quiet for only a short while. Booted footfalls soon drummed down the hallway, heralding the arrival of more inhumans.

The figure in crimson armour stood in the doorway, framed against the bloodstained wall behind. He waited there without moving, unable to accept what lay before his eyes.

'Let me through,' said Xaphen.

Argel Tal stopped him with a glare, and went inside himself.

Xi-Nu 73 lay in embryonic repose, curled foetally beside *Incarnadine*'s cracked and broken shell. The robot was in complete ruin, its armour riven into a hundred chopped canyons inflicted by hacking blades. The war machine's banner-cloak and oath scrolls were likewise ravaged, reduced to shredded rags. The walls and floor had fared no better. Holes showed through the sides of the armoured chamber into adjacent rooms, and where the walls still stood whole, they were cratered by punishing bolter fire.

Argel Tal noted all of these details in the time it took to blink, and paid no heed thereafter. He knelt by Cyrene's slack form. Blood deepened the red of her gown – the same crimson as his own armour – and painted the floor beneath her. Liquid red

flecked her neck and hair. The wound was a blatant one: a great split in her chest where the sword-tip had rammed into her. One blow, a heart strike, had been enough to pierce her precious mortality.

Blood. The presence was still thick and slow, but Argel Tal's despondent anger was rousing the daemon to wakefulness. *Blood soon. Hunt.*

The change was taking hold again. The daemon sensed battle, and the flesh they shared began to warp in reaction. Argel Tal breathed a bestial rumble, but the sound died in his throat when Cyrene shuddered.

She lived. How had he not seen? The faintest, barest rise of her chest betrayed the life that still beat beneath.

'Cyrene,' he growled, as much Raum now as Argel Tal.

'This…' Her voice was a child's whisper, so breathless that it barely made a sound. 'This was my nightmare.' Blind eyes found his with unwavering ease. 'To be in the dark. To hear a monster breathe.'

Claws closed around her frail form with possessive, protective strength, but the damage had long since been done. Her blood stung his fingers where it dripped onto them.

'What have they done to you?' Cyrene asked with a smile.

She died in his arms before he could answer.

HE HEARD THE voices, but had no reason to pay heed to them. The Other, yes, he heeded such chattering. The bleating of humanity: fleshy tongues flopping in moist mouths, and the gusting of lung-breath over meat to make a sound in the throat. Yes, the Other listened to the voices and replied in kind.

Raum did not. He barked a word of hate, drawn from the Old Tongue, hoping it would silence their nasal noises. It did not. *Hngh*. Ignore them. Yes.

He had sensed the need for the blood-hunt, and risen to the fore in a rush of release. The Other's body – no, the body they shared – assumed the hunting skin with ease now.

He ran, aching with need, pained by the pursuit of prey without catching it. Humans in his way were dashed aside. Raum did not look back. He smelled them die, scenting their lifeblood and brainmeat spilling out onto walls and floors.

Frail things.

You are killing the crew.

The Other was returning? This was good. They were stronger together. The Other's silence had been a cause for fear. As he returned, Raum felt his instincts shifting, adapting, made sharper by reason and the concept of past and future. Intellect, not mere cunning. Sentience. Better. He charged down the corridor, roaring at the humans to frighten them aside. As he passed, he did not slay them.

They are allies.

They slowed the hunt. He felt an itching reluctance to confess to his weakness of reason and forethought. *We will kill no more. We are whole.*

I… I am back.

Argel Tal drew in a breath, tasting the ship's recycled air with its stale-skin tang. Like a thread to be pulled loose, he scented something snagging at the edge of his perception. His friend. Aquillon. That ozone smell of charged weapons. The oils used to maintain the golden armour.

He ran on through the hallways, moving past more corpses, ended by blades rather than claws. *De Profundis* was packed with the dead, with slain Euchar lining the corridors.

You were gone too long. The humans bleat and snort at us.

The vox. Argel Tal blinked at the flashing runes. 'I am here.'

'Where?' Xaphen sounded as furious as Argel Tal felt. 'The Emperor's bastard sons have decimated half the Euchar on board. Where are you?'

'I… I lost control. I have Aquillon's scent now. I… Thirteenth concourse, at the port hangar deck.' Argel Tal stormed through the great doors onto the gunship bay.

The *Rising Sun*'s aft thrusters flared before him, as it roared its way out through the containment field and into the void beyond.

Argel Tal's scream echoed around the hangar.

'Brother?' Xaphen was shouting. *'Brother?'*

They run to hide. The prey goes to ground.

'They flee us,' Argel Tal raved across the general channel. 'They're running to the planet. Baloc! Track the *Rising Sun.* All batteries, track that ship and fire at will.'

'No!' Xaphen called. 'Erebus wants them alive!'

'I do not care what Erebus wants. Send them to the ground in flames.'

De Profundis came about in a ponderous arc. Along with most of the Astartes Legion fleet, it had suffered hard in the void battle, and was loath to respond to orders now. Signals and firing solutions flew between all nearby Word Bearers vessels, and seven ships let loose with their broadsides, spilling their immensely destructive firepower into space in the hopes of hitting the tiny gunship.

Less than a minute after it had blasted its way from *De Profundis*'s hangar bay, the *Rising Sun* cut through the atmosphere of Isstvan V, its hull aflame and its heat shields glowing molten orange with the stress of a spiralling, rudderless atmospheric reentry.

The capital ship *Dirge Eterna* claimed the kill shot.

Argel Tal listened to the scramble of conflicting voices over the vox, and the fleetmaster's description of the Thunderhawk falling in an uncontrolled descent, but not destroyed outright. There would come a time to dispute the *Dirge Eterna*'s attempt for glory, but that time was not now.

'Gal Vorbak to the assault deck,' he ordered. 'Ready a droppod.'

The gunship lay on its side, the very picture of twisted, miserable metal.

Red shards of hull were scattered across the surrounding terrain, while one engine still valiantly coughed, wheezing smoke too oily and black to be healthy thruster emission. For almost a

hundred metres behind, a furrow was carved into the soil where the Thunderhawk had come down and slid, shuddering, along the ground before ploughing headfirst into the ruins of a city wall. This eroded stone stood as warden around a long-forgotten city, home of a long-dead culture. Chunks of masonry broke off as the gunship smashed to a halt, and old stone rained onto the mangled hull plating, punctuating the abuse with a final insult.

The sky lightened over the wreckage as sunrise came to Isstvan V. An unremarkable star winked over the horizon, more white than yellow, too distant to offer much warmth. On the other side of the continent, a great funeral pyre still burned.

HE BREATHED THE cold dawn air through open jaws, tasting burning oil on the wind. His brothers, his crimson kin, hunted around and through the gunship's wreckage, seeking any spoor. Behind them, their drop-pod still hissed and creaked as the metal strained in the aftermath of plummeting through the atmosphere.

'They have not been down long enough to hide.' Xaphen spoke the words as an assured threat. At his side, Malnor was a twitching, ragged creature that drooled venom. Torgal climbed the gunship like something grotesquely simian, leaping and hooking into the hull with his bone-scythes to haul himself upward. His blinded face jerked to the side as he gave canine snuffs. Argel Tal stalked around the gunship's base, his claws folding closed into knuckly fists, then opening again into raptor talons. Like a desert jackal pack, the eleven remaining Gal Vorbak swarmed the downed Thunderhawk, sniffing out their prey. They did not need to hunt for long.

'So, at last, comes the *Crimson Lord*.' Aquillon's voice was biting in its insincerity. 'Revealing his true self to those he has betrayed.'

The Custodes walked from the shadow of a broken wing, their weapons held in loose hands. Each of them exuded rigid confidence. Their gait was assured, their shoulders back, their armour damaged and dented, but ostensibly whole.

The Gal Vorbak closed in. At the centre of the crimson circle, the three golden warriors went back to back. They offered the Word Bearers nothing but breastplates emblazoned with the Imperial eagle, and blades that would only ever rise in the Emperor's service. Of the Astartes Legions, only one had ever been honoured enough to engrave the aquila upon their armour – the once-noble Emperor's Children, now a core part of the Warmaster's rebellion. But these were Imperial Custodians, the praetorians of the Master of Mankind, and kept their mandate far above such concerns. The Custodes wore the aquila more often than the primarchs themselves. Each eagle symbol shone on their chests in solid silver, clutching lightning bolts in their claws. Nowhere else in the Imperium were the two symbols of the Emperor's ascension twinned like this: forged into the armour of his chosen guardians.

The hunters drew even closer. At their vanguard, Argel Tal spared a brief moment's concern for the fact the Custodes had not fired upon them. Perhaps they lacked ammunition after the battle aboard the ship. Perhaps they wished to end this cleanly, with blades rather than bolters.

'You killed Cyrene,' he said, the words thickened by spite and the acidic bile stringing between his jaws.

'I executed a traitor who had borne witness to a Legion's sins.' Aquillon aimed at his sword at Argel Tal's warped visage. 'In the name of the Emperor, what *are* you? You seem more nightmare than man.'

'We are the truth,' Xaphen barked at the trapped Custodes. 'We are the Gal Vorbak, the chosen of the gods.' All the while, the Word Bearers stalked closer. A noose was closing around the Custodians.

'Look upon yourselves,' Aquillon said in disbelief. 'You have cast aside the Emperor's vision of perfection. You have abandoned everything it meant to be human.'

'We were never human!' Hissing spit sprayed from Argel Tal's jaws as he roared the words. '*We. Were. Never. Human*. We were taken from our families to fight the Forever War in the name of a

thousand lies. Do you believe this truth is easy to bear? Look at us. *Look at us!* Humanity will embrace the gods, or humanity will embrace oblivion. We have seen the Imperium burn. We have seen the species brought to extinction. We have seen it happen, as it happened before. The cycle of life in a galaxy owned by laughing, thirsting gods.'

Aquillon's voice held nothing but kindness, and that made it all the crueller. 'My friend, my brother, you have been deceived. The Emperor—'

'The Emperor knows far more than he has ever revealed to you,' Xaphen cut in. 'The Emperor knows the Primordial Truth. He has challenged the gods and damned humanity with his hubris. Only through allegiance…'

'…through worship…' said Malnor.

'…through faith…' said Torgal.

'…will mankind endure the endless wars against the tides of blood that will drown our galaxy.'

Aquillon turned to each of the Word Bearers as they spoke their piece of the sermon. He looked back to Argel Tal at its conclusion.

'Brother,' he said again. 'You have been most blackly deceived.'

'You. Killed. Cyrene.'

'And you count this as some unfathomable betrayal?' Aquillon's laughter was rich and ripe, and to hear it made Argel Tal's teeth grind. 'You, who stand out of the Emperor's light, malformed into a monster. You, who binds tortured souls into the walls of your ship with forbidden lore, letting them suck in all psychic sound for forty years? *You*, accuse *me* of betrayal?'

Even through the daemon's rage fogging his thoughts, even through his grief-born anger at Cyrene's murder, his brother's words struck with enough force to wound. Argel Tal had walked through that chamber himself many times, and no matter how ardently he hated the necessity of it, he had still allowed its existence.

Images assailed him with guilty stabs, each memory knifing into him before he could cast it aside. Xaphen, chanting from the

Book of Lorgar, as an astropath shrieked before him. She was being disembowelled, and not quickly, her pain serving as a focus while she was chained to the chamber walls. Colchisian symbols that had been tattooed onto her flesh an hour before still bled freely. The vitae engines, maintained by an Apothecary of the Legion, would keep her alive for many months to come. The daemon Xaphen summoned within her would enslave her mind to that most simple of tasks: to draw in and digest any psychic communication from nearby minds.

No word would ever reach Terra, but for the falsified reports the Word Bearers made themselves. Compliances achieved. The perfect Legion. Lorgar, the Seventeenth Son, as loyal as any father could hope.

'I accuse you,' Xaphen laughed himself, 'of being a fool. Your precious astropath has been wailing your suspicions right into the mouths of listening daemons for four decades. Every time you huddled around him and heard the Emperor's words, you were hearing nothing more than the lies I whispered into a daemon's ears.'

Argel Tal did not add to Xaphen's relish. The chamber was no source of sinister pride for him. He had condemned not one woman to die in agony there, but sixty-one souls in all. The strain of possession wore the astropaths down with disgusting rapidity. Their degradation was quick, but never merciful. Stinking black cancers ate through their bodies after only a few months. Most faded fast, their minds eroded by the warp's winds like a cliff suffering in an endless storm. Few ever lasted a year – soon enough, it was always time to bind another helpless, screaming astropath into the life support engines, and inflict horrors upon their flesh with ritual blades and burning brands.

He considered it part of his penance to watch each binding. Each time, he would wait for the moment when the captive's eyes would glaze, not in death, but in surrender. Each time he would watch for that precious second when the daemon's consciousness devoured its way to the fore of the victim's mind. The

screaming would cease. Silence would resume, blessed in the wake of such sounds.

Nineteen had volunteered. Nineteen members of the fleet's astropathic choir, nourished by years of Xaphen's sermons, had volunteered for the honour of keeping the Legion's greatest secrets. Curiously, these burned out the fastest, succumbing to biological erosion before those who were unwillingly bound. It seemed suffering was a source of strength in the ritual – Xaphen had noted it, and informed Erebus. He received thanks in return, and the rite was amended in the *Book of Lorgar.* Xaphen had blazed with pride for weeks afterward.

The Custodes had found the chamber at the heart of the monastic deck, but someone, somewhere, somehow, had found it first. Aquillon had been led there. Of that, Argel Tal was certain. He vowed in silence then. Whoever that treasonous soul might be, he would pull it apart and feast upon its flesh.

'We were never human.' He said the words quietly, not even realising he spoke them aloud. Raum seized hold in the moment of melancholic anger, and the body they shared broke forward into a run.

'For the Emperor!' Aquillon cried.

The Gal Vorbak answered with the laughter of daemons.

IN THE YEARS to come, Argel Tal recalled precious little of the battle. Sometimes he attributed this to Raum's presence in ascendancy, sometimes he attributed it to his own guilt seeking to purge the night from his mind. Whatever the truth, any reminiscence left him hollow and worn, at the mercy of fragmented images and half-remembered sounds.

It was like thinking back to the moments of earliest childhood, before genetics had shaped his mind with an eidetic memory, when it was a struggle to fill a forgotten time with all five senses and make them feel real.

We were never human. He never forgot those words, nor how they were both true and false, all at once.

Malnor.

Malnor sometimes rose from the churning mess and resolved with clarity. When had Malnor died? How long had they been fighting? He wasn't sure. Nirallus's blade had hewn the Gal Vorbak's head clean from his shoulders, but Malnor did not fall. A wraithly image of his helm remained, snarling and shouting in silence. Nirallus, a blade master beyond anything Argel Tal had ever seen, had been forced to carve Malnor to pieces to put the warrior down for good.

The fight was too frantic and frenetic for sanity to have any place in its motions. Thought and formality vanished, replaced by training and instinct. A blur of blades and claws. The crack of ceramite. The grunts of pain. The smells of spit, of acid, of sweat, of parchment, of bone, of panic, of confidence, of smoky bolter muzzles, of charged blades, of tear-salt, of breath, of blood, and blood, and blood.

And then, the first kill.

Nirallus. The blade master. He killed Malnor, and that left him vulnerable. Torgal and Sicar had leapt onto the Custodian's back. Chop, chop, chop went the hacking blades, biting into armour joints at the back of the neck and the base of the spine. A life for a life.

Nirallus fell. Torgal leaped away, to safety. Sicar stayed to feed, and earned death himself. Aquillon. The Occuli Imperator. He avenged his brother's slaughter by ending Sicar a heartbeat later with clean, bright sweeps of his sword.

Argel Tal was on him in that moment. He remembered the leap, and the soreness in his throat as he roared once more. He remembered the juicy, meaty *crunch* as the Custodian's head ripped free of its neck. Like a flopping serpent, Aquillon's spine hung down from the dripping helm. A dizzying stench of blood; a maddened laugh that may or may not have been Argel Tal at all. He never knew for certain.

Six of the Gal Vorbak still drew breath. Six possessed warriors gave their desert dog cackles and ran for the last Custodes with daemonic vigour burning in their limbs.

And this was the last moment Argel Tal could ever recall, until the air was cold again and it was all over. Sythran pulled his helm free, and faced them bareheaded. Instead of waiting with his halberd in hand, he hurled it as a spear.

The Gal Vorbak scattered, but it still struck home. One of them took the blade in the chest with a *crack* like a falling tree. The spear pounded through ceramite, bone and meat with enough force to burst from the Word Bearer's back. The Astartes flipped over with the impact, his chest cavity stripped hollow, his lungs and two hearts blasted out of him, reduced to pulped meat on the ground.

Sythran had smiled as the other five descended upon him. He considered his vow of silence complete given the circumstances, and he laughed at the warrior he'd killed.

'I always hated you, Xaphen.'

VI

Valediction

It is so very like you, to think of one soul's safety while an entire world burns beneath your feet. I reassured you that you were wrong to worry; that all would be well, as it always is.

Now the sirens wail and the corridors echo with gunshots. The precaution you ordered as a comfort is now a last hope of defence, and I am not a fool – I know they will not be able to protect me against what is coming.

I write these words as quickly as I can, hearing the crashing of blades getting closer with each moment. I could try to hide, but I won't. The answer is obvious: they will find me no matter where I am, and I cannot outrun such enemies. They will find me if I cower in the cargo holds, or sit comfortably in my own chamber. The secrets I hold mean they have no choice but to come for me, and though you have left these breathless guardians, I am under no illusions. They will come and they will find me. When I die, I will die without betraying my Legion. I promise you that.

My life has been long, and I have no regrets. Few can say such a thing, and even fewer can do so with sincerity. Even you cannot make that claim, Argel Tal.

When you read these words, please know I wish you all the fortune in the world. I have heard the way you speak of Calth and the wars to come, and I trust in your vision and passion for the righteous crusade our Legion will lead. You will bring enlightenment to the galaxy. I have faith in that, never doubting it for a single moment.

Stand with Xaphen, as he stands by you. You are the sons of a demigod, and the chosen avatars of the true deities. No one can take that from you.

I hear blades against my door please remember th

EPILOGUE

The Crimson Lord

CALTH.

A bountiful, beautiful world, a world under the aegis of the XIII Legion, as Khur had once been claimed by the XVII.

Calth. A name on the lips of every Word Bearer. Calth, where Guilliman's Legion gathered for war.

Lorgar's Legion sailed almost in its entirety. Enough warships to blockade the beloved kingdom of Ultramar, and burn the face of every world black. Enough warriors to drive the Ultramarines to their knees. Isstvan had been forced into history at the point of a traitor's sword. Soon there would come another massacre to fit into Imperial archives alongside it.

Calth.

Argel Tal remained alone for now. He had no patience for the cries of praise his brethren kept offering in his presence. He had no desire for their regard or worship.

Instead, he sealed himself away from his own Legion, kept company only by the regrets he'd accrued over half a century of treachery.

Across his lap lay a golden blade of exquisite manufacture, etched and engraved for the hand of a master swordsman, gene-coded to activate only for the man it was made for. It was the weapon of one he had called brother, taken from Aquillon's body in the light of an unforgettable sunrise.

In his hands was a digital data-slate, sized for human fingers. A cursor blinked halfway down the screen, waiting for words that would never be entered. An unfinished sentence ended the text. Argel Tal had read it more times than he cared to recall, each

time hoping that he'd see the intent, the meaning, that never made it onto the page.

The ship shivered as it sailed through the underworld of human myth. They would reach Calth soon.

Aquillon. Xaphen. His brothers were gone.

Argel Tal put the sword aside, and left the data-slate on the modest table by his pallet. He rose to his feet, knowing it would soon be time to end this isolation. The Legion called. The Legion needed him. The primarch himself had asked if he would to stand with Kor Phaeron, leading the assault on Calth.

He would obey, even if he stood alone.

My brothers are dead.

No, the voice rose from within. *I am your brother.*